

Trade Union Organisers in Trade Union
Organising Strategies: building workplace
unionism or reinforcing bureaucracy

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Abstract

This thesis considers the role of union full time officers in union organising strategies. Two decades of promoting union organising influenced by models developed by the AFL-CIO, has failed to arrest the decline of UK trade unions let alone produce evidence of renewal. Focusing mainly on one region in the UKs largest public sector trade union, Unison, the research provides for a detailed account of how organising strategies affect union work, presenting thick and deep data from full time officers (Regional Organisers), Regional Management, Senior National Officials, other Unison staff and lay representatives. The research focuses on the previously neglected role of full time officers in union organising strategies and considers how such strategies can change both the role of the full time officer and relations with other union constituencies.

The research contributes to the ongoing study of trade union attempts to renew in the cold climate of globalisation and neo-liberalism. In doing so it also considers the much ignored area of the role of union bureaucracy in union organising strategies and the potential distortion or opposition it may present. Consequently the research also synthesises literature on union organising with classical theories of trade unions.

Unison embraced the TUC's promotion of grassroots organising and, it has been claimed, has been transformed into an organising union. The research questions this judgement by revealing a disconnection between organising strategies from workplace realities, resulting in an increasing managerialism and attempts to extend control over full time officers. A key consequence of these developments is the deterioration in the ability of Unison to represent members, both collectively and individually, leading to a potential crisis in representational capacity and ability providing the prospect for further union decline.

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACTU - Australian Confederation of Trade Unions

AFL-CIO - American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations

AFSCME - American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees

AO – Area Organiser

BDO - Branch Development Officer

BDOP - Branch Development and Organising Plan

COHSE - Confederation of Health Service Employees

CWA - Communication Workers of America

EC – European Community

ERA - Employment Relations Act 1999

FTO - Full Time Officer

HERE - Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees

liP - Investors in People

IWW - Industrial Workers of the World

JABO - Joint Assessment of Branch Organisation

LO – Local Organiser

MSF - Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union

MtOC - Meeting the Organising Challenge

NALGO - National Association of Local Government Officers

NHS - National Health Service

NORS - National Organising and Recruitment Strategy

NRP - National Recruitment Plan

NUIW - National Union of Insurance Workers

NUPE - National Union of Public Employees

PCS - Public and Commercial Service Union

RCN - Royal College of Nursing

RMT - Regional Management Team

RO - Regional Organiser

SEIU - Service Employees International Union

SMT - Senior Management Team

TGWU - Transport and General Workers Union

TUC - Trades Union Congress

UNITE - Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees

WOW - Winning the Organised Workplace

Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis considers prospects for trade union renewal after thirty five years of decline or at best stagnation. Specifically it examines union organising strategies in Unison and their failure to change its fortunes. In doing so it focuses on the role of union full time officers (FTO's) who have been largely neglected in the abundant research on trade union organising efforts, both in the UK and abroad. The thesis identifies the importance of union bureaucracies and their ability to oppose or distort strategies for union renewal.

My interest

Over twenty five years as a union full time officer I have observed and experienced, from the inside, the failure of three trade unions (NUIW, MSF and since 2001 Unison), to develop effective strategies for union renewal. Whether through merger (NUIW into MSF), 'new realism' with the positioning of workers as consumers of union services (expressed in 'MSF in the 21st Century') (see Carter 2000), or the contrary approaches of promoting employer partnerships or organising as an alternative to servicing unionism, adopted strategies have failed to provide the elusive pathway to union renewal. Crucially my observations of union leaderships engrained in me a deep scepticism that exhortation to follow one of these 'yellow brick roads' was based on proper analysis or rationale. The nature of trade unions, the position of full time officers, the industrial and political environment in which trade unions operate, the erosion of trade union power and growth of individualised employment rights require a comprehensive assessment of position and prospects which has been noticeably absent in developing strategy.

From the mid-1990s the TUC in public promoted among its affiliates a back to basics grassroots organising approach to union work. Heavily influenced by US and Australian experiences, it suggested a shift to a more radical union orientation; in reality this has proven not to be the case as in practice this was not lived out (Lustig 2002). At the sharp end of this strategy while employed by MSF as a Regional Officer, I have seen the promise of building union organisation evaporate as emphasis moved from the

'organising model' approach to union work towards the short term goal of recruitment (see Saundry and Willerby 2013 on Unison). Given this experience my own subjectivity regarding organising strategies is acknowledged and the ethical issues which arise in this research from my role are considered within the explanation for the methodology in Chapter Four. However, putting these aside for now, S. and B. Webb's classical work on trade unions (1894: xxv) noted the limitations and a preference for an internal examinee and perspective that enabled:

a continued watching, from inside the machine, of the actual decisions of the human agents concerned, and the play of motives from which these spring. The difficulty for the [outside] investigator is to get into such a post of observation without his presence altering the normal course of events. It is here, and here only, that personal participation in the work of any social organisation is of advantage to scientific inquiry. The railway manager, the member of a municipality, or the officer of a trade union would, if he were a trained investigator, enjoy unrivalled opportunities for precisely describing the real constitution and actual working of his own organisation. Unfortunately it is extremely rare to find in an active practical administrator, either the desire, the capacity, or the training for successful investigation.

This contribution to the abundant research on organising is undertaken from that preferred position as a full time trade union officer with the advantages inherent in a partly auto ethnographic approach (see chapter four).

Explanations for trade union decline

The wider context of this research is the undisputed decline in trade unionism, its explanations and proposed strategies for reversal. In 1979 membership of UK trade unions peaked at 13,289,000 (Certification Officer TUC, quoted in McIlroy 1995), 54.5% of the UK workforce. Despite various union strategies the atrophy of the British trade union movement continues: union density reduced from 32% in 1995 to 26% by 2011 (Brownlie 2012). The consequential loss of political and industrial influence, together with the reduced number of workers covered by collective bargaining arrangements, had much earlier reached what was deemed crisis levels (Hyman 1989). According to the latest WERS, public sector trade unionism, the area of research, is weakening with less than three fifths of workplaces covered by collective bargaining setting pay for two

fifths of the workforce: contrasting with two thirds as recently as 2004 (van Wanrooy *et al.* 2013).

Previous expansions of trade union membership had come from workers themselves seeking improvements in pay and working conditions through trade union organisation: not from national union strategies or voluntarist attempts by FTO's. Surges in union membership coincided with periods of industrial militancy (Cronin 1984). Membership levels in the UK were then sustained through the ability of unions to regulate workforces through industry wide agreements (Hyman 2007, Bowden 2009). Across Europe trade union organisation was underpinned by a combination of working class political parties prepared to support trade union organising, systems of centralised industrial relations which addressed employer resistance to union organisation and, in some European states, unions organising unemployment insurance (Western 1997).

In the UK, from the 1960s onwards, the commitment of successive governments to policies of full employment - through Keynesian aggregate demand economics - a welfare state and the recognition of the legitimacy of trade union influence, had grown increasingly strained. In 1979 such arrangements were terminated with the introduction of market based economic policies that would profoundly affect industrial relations and trade union power (Howell 2005). UK trade union influence has subsequently waned to the extent that the triumph of 'New Labour' saw the continuation of neo liberalism and a weakening of trade union political support (see Mooney and Law 2007, McIlroy 2010a, Smith and Morton 2010).

The loss of power has led some to view trade unions as institutions in permanent decline, as outdated anachronisms in the new post-modernist service based economies (Eldridge 2003). This latter perspective is but one of a number that cite external reasons for decline. Others include the growth of individualism within society (Storey 1995); negative employment laws which have constrained the effectiveness of trade unions (Ewing 2006), employer strategies of union avoidance (Dundon 2002) and the impact of human resource management techniques (Guest 1997). More broadly

economic restructuring has seen the long-term decline in strongly unionized heavy industries and the growth of new sectors based on services in which trade unions have been traditionally weak and unsuccessful in organising (Carter and Fairbrother 1998a). Whilst all the above explanations have varying degrees of legitimacy it is also the case that unions possess some capacity and ability 'to respond to and to shape the circumstances in which they find themselves' (Carter and Cooper 2002:713) given 'the capacity of unions to construct policies and make their own histories, as opposed to being merely victims of circumstances' (Carter 2000:118). Nevertheless the challenges for trade unions which such conditions present should not be underestimated.

From 1979 employers and government were able to press home their power and advantage through individualized employment practices; restrictive employment legislation and the ending of tripartite institutions that had provided for trade union representation and influence (see Hyman 1989, Undy *et al.* 1996, and Howell 2005). In combination the effects not only undermined trade union organisation in unionized workplaces but hamstrung efforts, if any, to organize in new sectors of the economy (Howell 2005). With the economic conditions underpinning previous trade union growth evaporating, across western liberal democracies trade unions were presented with similar problems of declining membership, reduced industrial power and loss of political influence. There were exceptions with national union organisations in Sweden and Belgium retaining political support and maintaining social insurance schemes (Western 1997).

The achievement of trade union objectives through collective strength and industrial militancy no longer seemed to work as major industrial defeats, most notably of the National Union of Mineworkers, exemplified (Beynon 1985). The subsequent undermining of confidence in the ability of workers to defend and advance their interests through forms of industrial action cannot be overestimated. Furthermore a consequence of the legal restrictions on industrial action was to give greater control to union bureaucracies for official authorisation of industrial disputes. The previous introduction of a raft of workers' rights including those of health and safety, protection

from unfair dismissal and the outlawing of sex and race discrimination commenced a programme of individual legal rights over and above the protections arising from actions of collective solidarity (Howell 2005). This emphasis on individual rights coupled with the encouragement of procedural resolution of workplace grievances was to militate against the willingness and ability to mobilise workers, isolating individual issues within internal employer procedures 'encouraging legal and individual action against employers rather than strikes and solidarity' (Carter and Cooper 2002:715). This proliferation of individual rights resulted in a significant rise in demand for trade union representational work presenting major practical and logistical problems given dwindling resources (Carter 2000). It follows that any successful union renewal strategy should acknowledge these issues and respond appropriately.

New Unionism

For trade unions the rhetorical appeal that 'something needs to be done' had apparently been answered by the response to crisis of unions in the United States. Signs of potential for revival came through successful organising campaigns based on supporting grassroots activism and a 'back to basics' approach to union organising (Milkman and Voss 2004). Notwithstanding differing conditions, industrial and political systems, culture and tradition, the US, and Australia (following the US example), were held up by the TUC to show how internal initiatives can arrest decline, rebuild confidence and ultimately renew trade unionism (Carter and Fairbrother 1998b). Reinforcing the view that trade unions had some control over their destiny it was proposed that by addressing internal organisation and transforming from servicing to organising, renewal would occur (Bronfenbrenner *et al.* 1998).

In 1996 the TUC relaunched itself under a 'new unionism' banner, encouraging commitment to the widespread adoption by affiliates, including Unison, of an organising approach to trade union work (Heery 1998). Indeed, organising was to be the 'top priority' (McIlroy 2010b:100). An emphasis on organising workplaces and promoting union activism provided for the potential for a different orientation of trade unionism and promised to challenge managerial prerogative (Howell 2005). Suggesting

a radical change in direction from previous union strategies, organising simultaneously questioned the role of union FTO's and lay representatives. A narrative emerged, influenced by US and Australian experiences, suggesting FTO's spent too much time 'servicing' and not enough time 'organising' (Carter 2000). The proposition that the work of FTO's could be separated or compartmentalised in such a manner is a contentious point. Certainly, whilst research into trade union FTO's has been infrequent, the assertions within this narrative were contrary to what were then recent findings predating 'new unionism' that concluded:

Union officers appear to be enabling rather than 'disabling' professionals in that at the heart of their work is an attempt to establish vigorous, self-supporting and relatively autonomous workplace trade unionism

Kelly and Heery 1994:119

Promoting organising as a priority for UK trade unions, given these findings, suggests a reinforcement of existing approaches of FTO's on a familiar terrain. However the narrative of the FTO as a 'servicer' not an 'organiser' was to prevail.

Furthermore emphasising organising was but one part of a strategic response to crisis. The TUC simultaneously encouraged union affiliates to enter into partnership agreements with employers, replacing pre-existing collective bargaining arrangements in the process (Heery 1998). In this 'new' approach to industrial relations unions and employers were to emphasise more collaborative working arrangements. In reality unions were to become junior partners in change management processes (McIlroy 2000). A questionable narrative of the approach of FTO's to union work and an industrial relations strategy at odds with the promotion of a combative grassroots membership confirmed contradictions and inconsistency in the 'new unionism' strategy. Furthermore the failure to appreciate or acknowledge the impact on union work from the demands emanating from the raft of individual and collective employment legislation since the Donovan Commission report (see page 18), and later EC directives, was in error. This workload has been amplified with recent developments in Unison (see Chapter Five).

Development of the research question

The research question came out of consideration of the decline in UK trade unions, the specific threats to public sector unionism from government policy, including new public management, and subsequent trade union responses. My initial thoughts were to consider the consequences for trade union organisation of outsourcing and privatisation of public services (see Whitfield 2001, 2006, Mooney and Law 2007). Linked to this area were the prospects for union renewal in UK public sector unions given the potential for new, more workplace focused trade union forms, contrasting with the centralised arrangements built around national bargaining. Such analysis connected to both the organising model that had provided a framework for US organising (Russo and Banks 1996) and the British work claiming the possibility of union renewal that increasingly focused on the public sector (Fairbrother 1996, 2005, Fosh 1993). However the literature review revealed that the scope of the intended research was too broad. What became apparent was that ideas of trade union renewal and strategies for organising were often articulated without consideration of internal constituencies and often competing interests within trade unions.

The organising element of 'new unionism' has attracted a significant volume of academic research focusing on the apparent successes and failures of such an approach to union renewal. Within this research work there has been limited direct analysis of the consequences for the union FTO and their importance to organising strategies (Carter 2000, Gall 2003). In focusing on the impact on the FTO role, the thesis analyses how FTO's both respond to, and are affected by, organising strategies.

Developing trade union strategy requires examination of internal union constituencies. Union constituent parts have to be united if a renewal strategy which proposes significant change is to succeed. Yet organising had been pushed down from above, and from the onset of the TUC re-launch in 1996 the narrative of the FTO as a 'servicer' not an 'organiser' became central in strategic consideration. Not only were they excluded from strategy development but FTO's were being informed that they needed

to change approaches to their work and unions needed to consider employment of staff with 'organising' in contrast with 'servicing' skills and experience .

The narrative became that changing the practice of existing staff, devolving representational responsibilities and investment in union organising work could potentially square the circle of both servicing existing members whilst simultaneously increasing capacity for building union organisation. The lack of evidence to support this narrative and the contention that organising and servicing could be defined and separated confirmed shortcomings in understanding of the practice of union work. It also illustrated a lack of critical consideration of the consequences of US organising approaches, where in union recognition campaigns, organising is defined as winning the recognition vote, whilst servicing was the subsequent contract negotiations (McAlevey 2012). Furthermore, it suggested that broad comparison could be made between UK FTOs and US union business agents in their approach to industrial work. Consequently a significant gap in the substantial research on union organising, ignoring both the nature of trade unions and the position of the FTO, was identified.

Specifically the research focuses on the changing role of FTO's in Unison, the UK's largest public sector union. It examines how FTO's impact on, and are affected by, Unison approaches to organising. This focus requires not only a critical account of classical theories of trade union bureaucracy, but also appreciation and evaluation of contemporary debates on union strategies, two areas that have yet to be synthesized. Of some significance to consideration of trade union organisation is Michels (1962) theory of the existence of an 'iron law of oligarchy' which has been subject to critique and debate given its deterministic analysis of socialist parties and trade unions. The concerns that arise from these areas are then utilized to see what insights they throw on the web of relations in which FTO's are engaged and, significantly, the prospects for trade union renewal.

Traditional research into trade unions, their place in society and their potential for influencing radical societal change, has placed or assumed the union FTO as a brake on the development of radical union memberships (see S. and B. Webb 1894, Pearce

1959, Cohen 2006). FTO's are classically positioned within the bureaucracy and 'constitute a distinct and relatively privileged social layer with interests different from and contrary to those of rank-and-file union members'(Darlington 1994:27). However my own experience informs a view that the relationship between FTO's and union memberships is more complex. Hence the role of the FTO in organising strategies is of importance.

Walliman (2006) identifies six features of a suitable research problem, being able to state the problem clearly and concisely, be of great interest to the researcher, be a significant problem, delineated, be able to obtain the required information and be able to draw conclusions to the problem and in doing so find some answers: these criteria are met. The problem relates to the position of union FTO's in the context of continuing union decline despite proclamations to the contrary and apparent union transformation (see among others Waddington and Kerr 2009, Heery *et al.* 2000, Heery *et al.* 2003). The issue is of great interest to the researcher given my own employment position and previous academic interest in the new unionism strategy of the TUC. The issue of trade union strength and influence, or lack of it, is timely given the evidence to support the position that policies within a framework of neoliberalism produces record levels of inequality in society (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). What is a significant problem is heightened by the failure to connect the decline in trade union power with this growing inequality gap. The question is suitably focused to be clearly defined, the information is readily available and it has enabled the drawing of some conclusions.

There is an assumption in the question that union organising strategies impact on the role of the FTO but also that in turn the FTO has a degree of control over how organising strategy is delivered. How these influences are on the one hand, complementary, on the other oppositional, is at issue. The contrast between ideas of building workplace unionism, or reinforcing union bureaucracies, is clearly rooted in the extent of the potential for trade union orientations, a question examined through sociological theories in Chapter Three. In addition identification of union objectives

and which constituent parts those objectives serve requires analysis given the implications for FTO motivations.

The research aims

The research considers how FTO's reinvigorate workplace based unionism, or, in the alternative, reinforce existing bureaucracies. In doing so it seeks to make a unique contribution to the growing research on trade union organising strategies in three ways. Firstly, as identified, the research into union organising comes from an internal perspective as opposed to external research. Secondly, the focus is on FTO who has been, despite the pivotal role played, a neglected agent in consideration of union organising both in terms of development of organising strategy and subsequent analyses. Thirdly, the research places such analyses in the context of classical sociological theory and in doing so emphasises the potential for distortion and opposition from trade union bureaucracy in the face of attempts to develop potentially more radical trade union forms.

The research will question both the nature of Unison's organising strategy and its impact on the role of the Unison FTO. There are under the general rubric of organizing a number of theories and strategies proposed for trade union renewal and revitalization. Theories around organising, renewal through decentralization, social movement unionism and mobilization theory, it could be argued, are in many respects complementary (Bronfenbrenner *et al.* 1998, Fairbrother 1996, Fairbrother and Yates 2003, Moody 1997 and Kelly 1998). All have implications for the role of FTO's that can be unclear, uncertain and dependant on prevailing circumstances. This approach is in contrast with theories around partnership and servicing which suggest a predetermined and set way of working that is more prescriptive and less dynamic (Bassett 1986). It follows that research on organising needs to be put in the context of explanations for the position of union officials set apart from the general union membership (see S. and B. Webb 1894, Michels 1962). Inevitably, there arises a need to re-examine theories of union bureaucracy (Michels 1962) and relations to rank and file membership (see S. and B. Webb 1894, Pearce 1959).

Of particular relevance is the theory that the bureaucratisation of trade unions has gone beyond FTO's to encapsulate workplace representatives (Hyman 1989b). This extension of the tentacles of bureaucracy can arguably be traced back to the Donovan Commission which recommended greater integration of union representatives into the structures of trade unions and encouraged the later introduction of statutory rights to paid time off for representation, training and facilities for trade union work as elements of the 'social contract' between the TUC and the then Labour government (Howell 2005). Incorporating shop stewards into formal procedural relations and official union institutions provided the possibility for increased bureaucratic control of union activity. Later, other factors increased this potential with union mergers, a strategic response to the unfavourable climate of the 1980s, leading to the development of 'super' unions such as Unison, enhancing the ability to counterpoise the interests of the union as a whole (and thereby the interests of the full time machinery of government or bureaucracy) against sectional interests (Michels 1962). The consequential reduction in the number of unions limited the potential for membership competition between unions, a potential lever for disaffected members seeking alternative representation in such circumstances (Allen 1954).

The position of, and approach to, organising strategies by union bureaucracies is significant given these tendencies to bureaucratisation. Whilst proclaiming a shift in focus towards workplace based grassroots trade unionism, this has to be in doubt. The lack of consideration of the role of bureaucracy in organising strategies and the impact on union bureaucracies themselves is a gap which requires addressing. The failure to consider the implications for relations at the workplace and the effect on trade union democracy inherent in the organising model approach, together with the promotion of workplace partnerships, suggests mere lip service was paid to the organising model by UK trade unions. Similarly while there are some relatively recent accounts of the role of FTO's (Watson 1988, Kelly and Heery 1994), there is an absence of any appreciation of their position in theories of trade union renewal. When FTO's have been considered it is limited to them being portrayed as a barrier to implementing organising strategies (Daniels 2010).

Thesis structure

As identified the uniqueness of the research is in connecting two specific areas of interest, classical and contemporary but complementary and relevant. Firstly, questions of union renewal and union organising have arguably neglected the role of the FTO, who are pivotal in determining the success of organising strategies. Secondly, the question of union organising strategies has not been linked to, and analysed, in the context of classical sociological theory relating to the nature and form of trade unions and the FTO position. Hence the need for two chapters which consider the development of organising strategies in light of 'new unionism' and separately the sociology of trade unions. With this in mind, the literature review, as Cooper (1989) identifies commonly, has three main purposes: to commence identification of previous scholarly work of importance, to build bridges between related topic areas and to identify the central issues in the research. In addition, the theoretical review is of some relevance for the analysis of organising strategies, the objectives within those strategies and the relationship with the FTO.

On union organising initiatives there is a vast amount of research in the United States identifying success, failure and the internal and external obstacles faced. The domination of business unionism post Second World War based on an alliance between US unions and corporate USA, underpinned by the Taft-Hartley Act, limited trade union ability to organise and challenge managerial prerogative (Carter 2001). Given this inherent conservatism the extent to which the organising model could break old habits and force a radical new direction for US unions is questionable. The lack of vision and clarity around issues such as power at work, unions in politics and internal forms reinforces this scepticism. Nevertheless unions which had previously kept labour academics at arm's length were now embracing their ideas for responding to a position of crisis. This no doubt contributed to the creation of a climate of enthusiasm and support for union organising work. Within subsequent analyses identifying differing aspects of union organising work included the application of comprehensive techniques which lead to successful union recognition campaigns (Bronfenbrenner *et al.* 1998, Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998) together with

differing interpretations of the consequences for internal union structures and democracy were prominent (see Milkman and Voss 2004, Tillmann and Cummings 1999).

To a significant but lesser degree there is a growing body of academic research in this area in the UK. Approaches range from critical examination of the coherency of the TUC's 'new unionism' (Carter *et al.* 2003), through the questioning of the relevance of the 'Organising Model' (De Turberville 2004); the highlighting of the question of objectives (Simms and Holgate 2013) to more observational type research on actual organising initiatives (see Heery *et al.* 2000, 2003).

The research question is set in the context of sociological analyses. As Cooper identifies 'the creativity in research review enters when reviewers are asked to make sense of many related but not identical theories or studies' (Cooper *ibid* p.19). As a starting point key classical texts were examined on trade union theory and the role of the full time officer (Gramsci 1977, Lenin 1902, Michels 1962, Webb and Webb 1894). In this latter area more recent literature produced sporadically over the past fifty years relating to the work and position of full time union officers was analysed: an advocate for workplace grievances, as a manager of discontent and as set apart from the union membership (Clegg *et al.* 1961, Watson 1988, Kelly and Heery 1994).

Chapter 2 of the thesis will examine the origins and nature of the organising model, its adoption in the USA and Australia and its impact since its reception in the UK in the mid-1990s. It will also consider subsequent debates around the relevance of the organising model. Heery *et al.* (2003) suggest that trade unions can and do adopt aspects of the organising model in a pick and mix approach to organising. De Turberville (2004) suggests that in effect what might be a one size fits all approach to union renewal is inadequate given the diversity and complexity of trade unions in the UK. Whilst others suggest that far from being irrelevant, UK trade unions have in effect "talked the talk" on the organising model but have failed to "walk the walk". Criticisms of the organising model ignore the reality that all too often strategies apparently based

around it are frequently mere recruitment campaigns as opposed to genuine attempts to organise workers into self-supporting collectives (Carter 2006).

Chapter three considers the FTOs position and gives an extended critical account of the sociology of trade unions with particular reference to ideas of bureaucracy, membership rank and file and the importance of democracy. Prominence is given to the idea that trade unions as institutions are inherently conservative and attempts at radical structural change, which the organising model implied, would inevitably meet resistance. Accepting the existence of trade union bureaucracy, the chapter questions the level to which such bureaucracies embrace change. Challenging the aforementioned position of FTO's to the union rank-and-file, the chapter considers both the potential for lay activists to be incorporated into union bureaucracy and FTO's ability to act as independent agents.

Chapter four provides explanation for the research methodology which emanates from a critical realist approach to the subject. Justification for the case study method of research is provided as is detail of the collation of data mainly through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The practicalities of the research undertaken and the detailed process of transcription and coding of data are explained. Finally comment on the ethics of the research and its strength given my position as a union full time officer, and the part auto-ethnographic approach is made.

Chapter 5 refers specifically to Unison which has received considerable attention in academic circles and this chapter will examine and utilise previous work to outline the history, structure and policies of the union relating to the political economy of the public sector. As the largest public sector trade union in the UK with a membership of 1,267,000 (TUC 2014), what Unison does and how it sees its role is of some significance for the future of UK trade unions.

Given the relative strength of trade unions in the public sector, the challenges to public sector unions presented by the former Coalition and current Conservative government's austerity policies is significant: as are the threats posed to trade union organisation from the 2015 Trade Union bill. The scale of actual and potential job

losses, outsourcing and cuts to terms and conditions, as well as services, questions the continued role of public sector trade unions (Grimshaw and Rubery 2012). What public sector unions do to resist the assault on them, and what Unison in particular does, is therefore of some importance.

Furthermore with deep seated problems of inequality in the UK compounded by continuing policies of austerity, Unison's position as both a representative of public sector workers and a champion of public services is crucial. It is also of interest as a body for research given the longstanding doubts expressed of the ability of general unions to properly represent workers from across industry, occupation or sectors:

all the attempts at 'general unions' have, in our view been doomed to failure' because of a trade union is formed for 'the distinct purpose of obtaining concrete and definite material improvements in the conditions of its members employment' and the grievances which are prominent within different groups of workers at different times in different localities differ.

S. and B. Webb 1894:139

As previously identified, trade union growth coincided with periods of worker militancy, and not any specific national organising or recruitment strategy, the importance placed on such strategies by Unison is therefore also of interest. As chapter five identifies, the position of management within Unison from inception adds legitimacy to questions regarding motivations, the nature of union organising strategies and, given the complexity of trade unions, the competing interests which can emerge.

The Unison response to the TUC proclamation that organising was the 'top priority' was the National Organizing and Recruitment Strategy (NORS). Introduced in 1997 the objective was to address a decline in union density in the public sector. However in the following years Unison membership remained relatively static. This could be seen as a success in light of marketisation strategies and when compared to other UK unions. Yet the increased investment in public expenditure post the 1999 Budget did not reflect in increased membership levels (Waddington and Kerr 2009).

NORS was reviewed and amended under the heading “Meeting the Organising Challenge” (MtOC) which chapter five considers in detail. This revision introduced new grades of organising staff, providing the opportunity for existing non-organising staff to undertake organising work as ‘Local’ and ‘Area’ Organisers. The expansion of these grades has increased Unison staff resource for organising. It has also resulted in changes to the role of Unison FTOs (Regional Organisers): reduced in number, they now have management responsibility for Area and Local Organisers and a larger geography of industrial responsibilities.

The guiding themes in the examination of Unison will be the union’s organising strategy and the claims it makes about itself. The general context and sociological theories will be considered, linked to examination of changing responsibilities for FTOs. The research provides for in depth analysis of FTO’s day to day relations with other parts of Unison and centres on the evolving changes in Unison with the introduction of the organising model through the ‘Winning the Organised Workplace’ (WOW) course and the subsequent restructure of staffing through ‘Meeting the Organising Challenge’ (MtOC).

Given the centrality of Unison to UK trade unionism, and its on-going restructuring to maintain its organisation, further study is both warranted and timely. In particular, given the absence of concerted reflection on the nature and role of FTO’s the need for study is reinforced. While trade unions have been politically unfashionable for nearly three decades, there has nevertheless been continuing academic interest in them. Moreover, Unison has attracted much attention from its initial formation (Terry 1996) through to today. A lot of that interest has revolved around the union’s claim to be transformed into an organising union (Waddington and Kerr 2000, 2009). The research here focuses mainly on one Unison region, labelled ‘A’ Region, chosen for the research given its reputation for successful recruitment levels, innovation in approaches to organising work and its influence on national organising strategy. Although experience of Unison lay representatives in ‘A’ Region is reflected in the data collated on lay

representatives in other regions participating in the critical incident analysis in Chapter Six.

Chapters, Six, Seven and Eight, consider specific findings from the research. They address questions of relevance of national union organising strategies, increased managerial control of FTOs for purposes of implementing national and regional strategies, within a preferred working methodology and how servicing and organising has developed into limited recruitment and representation choices. On this latter point a representation crisis is emerging threatening further an already challenging trade union position. These areas are considered in relation to critical incidents examined as an integral part of the research at local, regional and national levels. So chapter six will consider the relevance of Unison national organising strategies to the organising work of full time officers and activists at workplace level. Chapter seven considers the increasing attempts to control full time officer work at regional level and the implications for organising work and relations within Unison. Chapter eight considers in detail the conundrum of addressing the representational demands of members (servicing) whilst attempting to deliver organising objectives and how national campaigns have come to undermine ideas of collective organisation.

Chapter nine provides an overview, analysis and evaluation of the issues as they impact upon Unison. It includes remarks about the nature of the union and its internal relations, the relevance of national organising strategies and how Unison structures and management encourage bureaucratic orientation of both FTO's and lay representatives.

Chapter ten concludes the thesis with identification of the specific contribution to knowledge and theory in relation to union renewal, the nature of bureaucracy and the position of the FTO. Concluding remarks about the general nature of trade unions and reflections on the specific findings are made.

Defining a Unison full time officer

Previous research into FTOs defines the position by the work undertaken as union employees. I have had job titles such as National Officer, Regional Officer and currently Regional Organiser. The duties and responsibilities have been similar, if more recently contentious, given what became the dominant narrative around FTO roles as 'servicers' not 'organisers'. Watson identifies a number of titles for FTO's within different unions such as Regional Official, Area Organiser and District Organiser (Watson 1988).

The key duties and responsibilities as identified by Watson (1988), and also Kelly and Heery (1994), include organising, negotiating, representing and dealing with relations more generally with employers and union constituency parts. These functions set apart the FTO from both the union membership and other paid union staff. However what chapter five identifies is that MtOC staffing structures produces a new division of labour which to some extent salami slices the FTO role into the new organising grades to one of organising or servicing, reskilling or deskilling staff, whilst creating management roles which potentially become a mere transmission belt for targets (on labour process see Braverman 1974). The focus of this research on FTOs in Unison is the Regional Organiser, formally the Regional Officer, although some consideration of these new roles of Area and Local Organiser is also required.

Chapter Two: The decline of trade unionism and the promise of organising

Introduction

This chapter provides both further context for the research and considers the introduction of the organising model, how organising became defined and the adequacy of existing literature on union organising strategies. On a contextual level it commences with a brief consideration of the impact of globalisation on national trade union confederations, potential responses and the specific circumstances faced by UK trade unions. Specific examination of restructuring in the public sector and prospects for union renewal is made. Attention is then given to union organising in the United States and the contrasting organising and servicing models of trade unionism. The chapter notes how the organising model was borrowed by and influenced union renewal strategy in the Australia trade union confederation ACTU.

Turning to the UK, consideration of the decline in British trade unionism, the rise in 'consumer unionism' and the relaunch of the TUC, with its 'new unionism' strategy of organising and partnership, is made. This is followed by closer examination of the organising model and consideration of debates on servicing, organising and the role of the FTO. With exceptions (Fletcher and Hurd 1998, Simms and Holgate 2010), neglected in the organising literature is consideration of union objectives. The chapter considers union objectives and whether organising is leading to radical or entrenching more conservative union forms. Examination of the literature confirms three problems which emerge. Firstly is the contested nature of organising and particularly the relationship between servicing and organising; secondly the lack of focus on union full time officers in organising strategies; thirdly the absence of consideration of union bureaucracy and how this can lead to distortion and/or opposition to organising, a point considered in more detail in chapter three.

Globalisation and potential union responses

The ending of the post-war boom and the onset of economic crisis of the 1970s saw the ideology of neo liberalism gain political prominence assisted by processes of

globalisation with the ending of financial controls, fixed exchange rates and acceleration in information technology. The consequences included increasing shifts and divisions in production beyond national boundaries; diversification and increased competition: all of which affected the composition of the traditional working class (McIlroy 2010). Neo-liberal state's in social and economic policy deregulates and privatises or withdraws from social provision of some public services (see Harvey 2005; Whitfield 2001). In the UK, Conservative governments from 1979 embraced such ideology with vigour (Callinicos 2010). Their view being summarised by McIlroy (2010:28), was that unions:

had exploited the monopoly position state sustenance and full employment had provided, to utilise the closed shop and the strike weapon to increase wages to artificial levels and generate inflation. Unions distorted efficient deployment of labour through job controls which crippled innovation, productivity, investment and competitiveness.

Trade unions' legal protections and rights became a specific target for attack, 'There can be no salvation for Britain until the special privileges granted to the trade unions...are removed' (Hayek 1980:52). The special privileges included the blanket immunity to trade unions in furtherance of a trade dispute provided by the 1906 Trade Disputes Act (Howell 2005).

The ensuing Conservative attack was based on incremental and progressive changes within the industrial relations arena. In 1980 the Employment Act abolished statutory recognition rights for trade unions, restricting picketing and secondary action, introducing the requirement for ballots for new closed shops and providing for state funding for union ballots. In 1982 the Employment Act extended the ballot requirement for closed shops. The definition of a trade dispute was tightened thus increasing the risk of loss of trade union immunities from employer claims for damages. The 1984 Trade Union Act claimed to democratize union procedures through introducing the requirement for ballots for union key positions, for maintaining political funds and before industrial action (McIlroy 1995). For trade unions neo-liberalism ironically meant more, not less, state interference.

Between 1988 and 2003 five other major pieces of legislation were introduced. These included postal voting for industrial action ballots, notice required to employers before the commencement of industrial action and protection for members who refused to participate. In addition giving power to employers to selectively dismiss workers involved in unofficial industrial action and making all secondary action unlawful potentially limited the effectiveness of strike action. It became lawful for employers to offer inducements for employees to accept non-union contracts of employment and restrictions on time off for trade union representatives were introduced (McIlroy 1995).

The number of strikes declined substantially during the 1980s, from 2125 in 1979 down to 630 by 1990, reaching its lowest level for 50 years (Edwards 1991). In this context trade union and other proponents of 'new realism' had argued for the need to shift from a class based approach to industrial relations to one based on competitive markets. The employer and employee were on the same side in a competition against other employers and their employees, both within national boundaries, and increasingly outside as globalisation gathered pace (Bassett 1986).

The problems faced by UK, and other trade union confederations, were not however wholly rooted in political ideology. Whilst US unions had also been under attack from the federal state following the election of Ronald Reagan (Buhle 1999), in a more favourable political climate, Australian unions had experienced decline suggesting economics as much as politics as the root cause (Griffin and Svenson 2002). The opening of Australian markets to global competition and ensuing structural economic change contributed to significant falls in membership: pre-dating political change and subsequent anti-union legislation from the mid-1990s (Bowden 2009). The impact of globalisation, with intensified product and service competition, makes it more difficult for increases in labour costs to be passed on to the consumer (Simms and Holgate 2013). Given the global nature of union decline, trade union confederations looked beyond their own shores for responses to these common challenges. The case was also advanced that whilst conditions for unionisation had changed there were internal

issues for trade unions in that they had neither adapted to nor adopted effective strategies for these new circumstances (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998, Crosby 2005). Rather than being impotent in the face of such forces, Jarley *et al.* (1998:277) proposed that 'unions have an important degree of control over their own destiny'. The failure of unions to recruit in the developing service sector and new technology based industries, whilst simultaneously focusing resources on existing memberships, was a weakness of internal union organisation and strategy. Extending managerial prerogatives, increased competition and the growing power of corporations may enhance employer control over labour processes, but it can also result in work intensification, injustice and unfairness sowing seeds for potential union organisation.

It is in such conditions that mobilisation theory identifies two connected opportunities for union renewal (Kelly 1998). At the micro level collectivisation rests on the individual belief of the worker that the union has the capacity and the will to address their sense of injustice. For the union to succeed, moreover, this belief needs to be held by a substantial number of workers. The subsequent collective grievance establishes a workplace group identity, not only able to resist management pressures, but also to exert counter pressure on those agents (management) able to provide a remedy. Mobilisation theory at a macro level recognises the importance of structures which are conducive to collective action. Trade unions need to exercise economic and/or political power beyond the workplace to demonstrate that at the micro level unions can address local injustice. In this theory union revitalization comes from demonstrations of bargaining power, political power and institutional vitality. Factors which public sector unions were arguably better placed to exercise. Whilst globalisation primarily impacted on production of manufactured goods, the public sector did not escape change.

In the public sector

Public sector unions had not experienced the impact of globalisation to the extent of private sector based unions. The challenge however came from neo-liberal policies which resulted in significant public sector restructuring with more decentralized and

devolved forms of managerial organisation. The creation of internal markets, the redrawing of the boundaries of the state sector through market testing and privatisation, and attempts to abolish or diminish nationally determined conditions of employment became both threats and opportunities for public sector trade unions (Fairbrother 1996).

The threat from new public management was exacerbated by historical functions, organisational form and rationale, centred on national, centralised collective bargaining systems that emerged under Whitleyism, making public sector trade unions structurally (and culturally) ill equipped to meet the challenges presented by such changes. As Carter (2000:123) identifies:

Weak workplace organisation has traditionally been both masked, and at the same time reinforced, by a concentration of bargaining at national level which was seen as the locus of power and influence

The shift in managerial decision making to the workplace could present an opportunity for trade unions to refashion themselves. Fairbrother optimistically maintained that 'unions in the state sector are in a position to begin to develop more active forms of workplace unionism than was the case in the past' (Fairbrother 1996:111). For Fairbrother (1996:113) this new form of unionism has three aspects:

First, this is a union form where there has been a reintegration of representations and the procedures associated with these relations, and that of mobilization. In other words, representatives become part of the process of membership mobilization as active participants. Second, unions embody more participatory forms of control and accountability, which emphasize the importance of membership involvement and activity. . . . Third, members articulate and express their experiences in ways that are central to the union mode of organization and operation.

Fairbrother (1996) contended that the subsequent rearticulation of managerial organisation had implications for both management and trade unions. On the management side, with service restructuring, privatisation, fragmentation, market testing, compulsory competitive tendering, appraisal systems and performance related

pay determination, all combined to present a new type of management with increasingly individualized work relations reshaping the state sector.

Whilst centralised national negotiations may have a disempowering effect on union members at the workplace, the threat to trade unions from the breakup of national bargaining should not be underestimated given the logistical challenges of supporting members in a multitude of bargaining situations previously the remit of a single bargaining unit. This optimistic view of public sector transformations ignores the challenges which even with an enthusiastic and committed national union leadership would find difficult to address. It does not explain how union renewal is to occur in workplaces with no culture, tradition and limited experience of collective bargaining and local union activism.

These new forms of public management do however challenge the continuing rationale of some union structures. This challenge raises both prospects for internal union restructure, an apparent prerequisite for union renewal, and internal union conflict over differing bureaucratic interests (Hyman 1989). Fairbrother later comes to recognise that unions are faced with a stark choice to renew through a strategy of supporting workplace based unionism and so decentralizing, or further ossifying by maintaining existing bureaucracies (Fairbrother 2000). The apparent promotion of grassroots based unionism suggested that some UK unions in the public sector, including Unison, were ready to grasp the nettle faced by new public management forms. However if radical approaches to union renewal were to be successful traditions of conservatism had to be overcome.

Organising in the US

Such a tradition of strong conservatism came to dominate US trade unions post second world war. The impact of the 1947 Taft – Hartley Act, the effect of the cold war on industrial relations and the emergent dominance of business unionism providing for an economic straitjacket on the objectives of US trade unions. The Taft- Hartley Act provided numerous amendments to the National Labour Relations (NLRA) or Wagner Act, which had provided the legal framework supporting the upsurge in unionisation

among general workers in 1930s 'New Deal' America (Lopez 2004). Crucially it was a legal framework for workers' rights arising out of popular protest and workers' demands. Within a few years union membership in the USA had doubled (Turner and Hurd 2001). However post-second world war, in the climate of the Cold War, the restrictions from Taft-Hartley and the expulsion of left wing activists in anti-communist purges led to a more conservative trade union form (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003). As Bronfenbrenner *et al.* (1998:4) identified 'Taft-Hartley included strict limits on union organizing and mutual aid tactics while granting employers greater latitude in opposing unionization'. Carter (2001) describes the impact of Taft-Hartley as a Faustian pact between unions and the state. Unions ceded control of the factory for sharing in the economic gains of increased productivity. This business unionism was typified by:

a new culture in which collective bargaining and worker struggles became subject to greater legal scrutiny, regulatory control, and court precedent. Disputes were safely contained in a web of administrative procedure. The relationship between labor and capital moved from the no holds barred battlefield of workplace conflict to the well-ordered administrative terrain of industrial relations and human resource management-the province of a growing army of labor relations professionals, lawyers and administrative managers on both sides of the negotiating table

Eisenscher 1999:64

Whilst on occasion there were attempts to change and renew unions through democratic challenges the overwhelming dominance of union bureaucracies prevailed (see Brecher and Costello 1999, McCarthy 2010). The battle for union progress and advantage was to be limited to the terrain of collective and individual legal rights. However the 1980 election of President Reagan saw neo liberalism, with anti-union, pro-business practice, dominate US government policy making leaving such strategy increasingly futile, even when parties apparently more sympathetic to unions later came to power (Brecher and Costello 1999). This in a context where Deery (1995) contended that 'the intensity of employer opposition to trade unions in America is without parallel anywhere in the industrial world'.

By 1990 the state of American unionism, now post-Cold War and with increasing problems of aggressive union busters, created some urgency for re-evaluation of union

strategy (Simms and Holgate 2007). Relying on political change to introduce new laws favourable to trade unions evaporated with the election of President Bill Clinton as the ongoing neoliberal consensus prevailed (Moody 2007). Thrown back on their resources some unions began to be receptive to calls for a new model of unionism. This model was summarised by Russo and Banks (1996) and contrasted with business unionism approaches reflected in a servicing model of trade union work in which:

SERVICING MODEL	ORGANISING MODEL
The union leadership solves problems for members on basis of complaints or requests.	The union leadership stimulates and involves members in problem solving in group process or collective action
There is a total reliance on grievances and negotiation processes	has a modus operandi is not limited to the bargaining process
There exists a passive membership or limited to leadership requests for cooperation	has a commitment to education, communications from and participation in the union
There is a reliance on specialists, experts and union staff	develops and depends on members skills and abilities
Secretive and closed communication channels	has sharing of information and open communication channels
Centralized and top heavy organizational structure	has a decentralized organizational structure
Dependent on management, reactive	is independent of management and proactive in its agenda setting
Makes distinctions between internal and external organizing activities	makes no distinction between internal and external organizing activity

The SEIU gained particular weight amongst proponents of the new direction promised by an organising model due both to its size and successes. Much publicity and kudos was gained by its achievements in the ‘Justice for Janitors’ campaign and the ‘organizing of 74,000 minimum wage home care workers in Southern California’ (Lopez 2004:9). Crucially in targeting occupational groups such as janitors and health care workers:

SEIU staffers argue that it makes sense to aim for industries in which a union can gain control over the local labour market rather than those that are in international competition

Slaughter 1999:51

In 1995 the election of SEIU leader John Sweeney to the leadership of the AFL-CIO raised the potential for the wider adoption of SEIU organising methods. With an apparent realisation that there was a need to challenge, not accommodate, corporate capital, and support rank and file intensive workplace campaigns; the AFL-CIO was developing a more strategic approach to trade union organising (Carter and Fairbrother 1998a).

The proposition that trade unions could renew through emphasizing workplace based, grassroots organising was in contrast with traditional business unionism thinking. In rejecting previous leadership strategies for union revitalization, regardless of the labour laws in place, the point of issue became the need to organise workers into effective collective and campaigning organisations (Lopez 2004). The SEIU and other unions such as HERE, CWA and AFSCME, seemed to be rejecting business unionism practices and reclaiming more radical traditions within American unionism (Rachleff 1999). Apparently reverting to ideas of worker self-organisation and past trade union forms that had been encouraged by the Knights of Labor and the IWW (Wobblies), narratives of sustained worker self-organisation recalled past rank and file union forms in syndicalism (see Brecher and Costello 1999, Kimeldorf 1999, Tillmann and Cummings 1999, Simms and Holgate 2008). Furthermore some unions were going beyond traditional exclusive business unionism agendas to broader and more inclusive campaigns.

In union recognised workplaces collective bargaining demands became broader challenging managerial prerogative and encouraging members to be active participants in grievance raising and resolution. A wider agenda seeing unions as a voice for the unorganised, developing community links and redefining political roles, led to new alliances within communities and affecting relational functions within unions between FTOs and members (Eisenscher 1999). Demands for a minimum wage for all workers,

unionised and non-unionised, a blanket amnesty for illegal immigrants and the development of connection with other social groups who share similar aims around social justice e.g. churches and community organisations ensued. Some unions were becoming strategic, more community focused, allying with other likeminded organisations (Moody 1997). A transformation from a business unionism to a social movement unionism comparable to the pre-second world war CIO appeared to be the direction of travel.

The AFL-CIO organising strategy included training a whole new cadre of lay activists and shifting union resources for organising from 2% on average to 30% (Rachleff 1999). In practice this new organising approach meant shifting financial and staff resources to organising new workplaces, in doing so reducing resources available for servicing existing members. This was to be addressed by increased reliance on devolving representation of workplace grievances to local representatives properly trained in grievance handling (Milkman and Voss 2004).

To support the drive to organising the AFL-CIO had in 1989 established its own Organising Institute to train new organisers in the application of organising techniques to be utilised across affiliate trade unions (Turner and Hurd 2001). The rationale for the Organising Institute was as organising unions were growing, an institute could promote organising techniques and approaches across AFL-CIO affiliates, including weaker and smaller affiliated unions unable to shift resources to organising (Lerner 2002). Expansion in the numbers of Organizing Institute graduates occurred given evidence of their worth in the field (Hurd 1998).

Recruitment of new organisers was broadened to include external candidates. Believing that the traditional route to FTO positions reinforced past organising failures (Voss and Sherman 2000), it was necessary to attract into union organising people from other walks of life with skills transferable to the new organising agenda. Supporting workers dealing with their own issues and recognising the broader picture, adopting campaigning tactics from other social movements and making alliances beyond the trade union were part of the new organiser's strategy (Milkman 2000).

This new approach to organising campaigns aimed at winning union recognition through the adoption of a combination of organising techniques including an organising committee of workers, worker home visits to discuss the union recognition bid and its implications, small group meetings, solidarity days, use of local media and community groups and the promotion of issues based around fairness, equality and social justice (Bronfenbrenner 1998 and Bronfenbrenner and Hickey 2004). With campaigns seeking union influence on the specific labour market, broadened out with community alliances and raising issues of social justice, all combined to suggest union transformation.

Some caution has been expressed over the consequences of diverting resources away from existing membership bases and in assumptions that a lay member base was ready to throw up new activists to pick up the emergent representational challenges. With reduced influence at the level of the state, and reduced resources for dealing with employers where unions had recognition, unions risked the retention of their existing membership base. As one organiser involved in the Justice for Janitors campaign stated: 'Organising is important. You have to organise, but in order to organise you have to maintain' (Williams 1999:213). However the possibility that union support for and from existing members could deteriorate was a position which seemed to be accepted at the most senior levels within the AFL-CIO:

Although they did suggest using rank and file organizers to expand, they were ominously silent on the culture, level of democracy and participation, and internal dynamics within existing unions. Sweeney and Bensinger even intimated that members might have to learn to accept less service while their full time officers and staff were engaged with the business of organizing.

Rachleff 1999:93

The apparent success of US organising came to influence other union confederations experiencing similar problems of decline.

Organising in Australia

Trade union growth in Australia had been heavily assisted by the application of an arbitration system which provided for union recognition, closed shop or union preference clauses in employment contracts and national industry based collective agreements. The Australian Industrial Relations Commission provided for a highly regulated industrial relations system which saw the channelling and resolution of disputes within arbitration procedures (Griffin and Svenson 2002). The system is described as a 'union official paradise' (Crosby 2005:51) and draws comparison with the position of the United States FTO, or business agent, in that the tradition for addressing workplace issues relied on the ability and knowledge of the FTO and not the organisational strength and power of the union membership: in essence a classic example of Russo and Banks' (1996) servicing model of trade unionism. In 1952 Australian union density peaked at 62%. Whilst by 1982 this was still 50%, the later undermining of the arbitration system with economic deregulation, followed by political opposition and loss of employer support, accelerated that decline leading to a crisis in trade unionism given workplace organisation was often weak or non-existent (Bartram *et al.* 2008).

Four years after the establishment of the AFL-CIO Organising Institute a delegation of Australian trade union officials undertook a study tour of the US. Impressed by campaigns such as Justice for Janitors, the Organising Institute and the apparent transformation process they returned to Australia enthused and inspired. What they had experienced was a potential answer to comparable problems: a commitment for resources to establish an Australian version of the Organising Institute was made. Trade unions had become procedural organisations servicing a largely passive membership far removed from the campaigning bodies of their origins formed through industrial struggles (Crosby 2005). The ensuing 'Organising Works' programme borrowed many of the US organising techniques for purposes of training a new generation of union organisers to recruit non-members and getting them organised into a union: in doing so aiming to extend the frontiers of trade unionism across Australia (Crosby 2005).

Organising Works was established as a training unit funded by ACTU with a remit to recruit young organisers to build union membership and change the culture of existing union branches from the characteristics of a 'servicing model' of unionism to one based on Russo and Banks 'organising model' (Griffin and Svenson 2002). The structural changes in long standing industrial relations arrangements led to a rethinking of how trade unions organised and represented members (De Turberville 2007b). The role of the union FTO in Australia, as with the US Business Agent, was seen to require reorientation from industrial advocacy to workplace organising (Peetz et al 2007).

Turnbull (1997) identified the emphasis became encouraging membership ownership of union campaigns based on their own issues at work. The importance of identifying leaders among the workers, and establishing committees for organising and mapping of members was emphasised. Recruitment of new members was integral to the process of union organising. Collective action becomes forms of solidarity action as opposed to industrial action (Turnbull 1997). This process is referred to as the Organising cycle, "issue-organisation-unity-action", designed to build union consciousness, encourage membership participation and foster rank and file leadership. The apparent changes to union work from this new organising strategy encouraged inquiry from the TUC:

Senior trade unionists travelled to the United States and Australia several times throughout the mid-1990s, explicitly seeking to learn from innovative initiatives such as the AFL-CIOs Organizing Institute and ACTU's Organising Works programme in Australia. These programs strongly influenced the thinking of senior UK policymakers within the TUC and affiliate unions.

Simms *et al.* 2013:4

However what was to become known as 'new unionism' retained a significant element of its previous conservatism suggesting at best reform and not revolution at the TUC.

The decline of workplace unionism and the rise in 'consumer' unionism

For a period in the 1960s and the early 1970s British trade unionism was characterised by strong shopfloor organisation that gave rise to the claim in the Donovan

Commission that Britain suffered from two systems of industrial relations - the official and the unofficial. In reality, this was more the case in the private sector, and engineering in particular, than it was generally, but as engineering provided the majority of strikes, and they were largely unofficial, the focus was understandable (Hyman 1989c). The slowing of the economy from the 1970s and heightened international competition stiffened employer resistance to such actions causing lengthening disputes and raising the importance of official trade union support. This change of emphasis was to be reinforced by the political assault that followed the election of the Conservative government in 1979.

The attacks on trade union organisation that culminated in the 1984 Miner's Strike were both political and economic. The sharp deflation of the economy caused a massive loss in industrial capacity and with it a loss of trade union members in areas that had high density and shopfloor organisation. In the public sector privatisations weakened the power and ability of unions to coordinate strikes. Alongside these policies was a programme of legislation restricting the ability of unions to pursue industrial action, which further eroded shopfloor organisation and power, increasing reliance on the formal institutions of trade unions. The aim of legislation was not to make trade unions illegal but to constrain their power through restrictions on both the legitimate subject of industrial action and the conduct for prosecuting any dispute (see Smith and Morton 1993, Howell 2005).

Following the Miner's Strike, the reaction of unions was largely supine, illustrated by the movement towards 'New Realism' (McIlroy 1995) that embodied a retreat from any challenge to government policy and the simultaneous accommodation of employer power and prerogatives. Increasingly trade unions mimicked the growing neo-liberal ethos of the period, viewing themselves as a contractual service to members now constructed as consumers. Such thinking is illustrated in the views of a former General Secretary of the MSF union (later merged into Amicus and then Unite):

We . . . need to see members as our customers. As sophisticated users of services, people will make choices depending on what impresses them about a particular company or product and what is in it for them. They

have become used to high standards and have expectations based on those standards. It is in this framework of, of consumer choice that unions increasingly have to stake their claim to recruitment. We need to reassess what people really want from a union and what will make them join

Lyons quoted in Heery 1996:183

What was striking in this view of union members was that whilst previous descriptions of UK trade union solidarities may have been exaggerated (Colling 2009) no evidence was offered to support the claims made. In such a model members were seen as largely quiescent and the locus of any action on their behalf moved to FTOs. Where members continued to push for strike action they were increasingly dependent on official approval.

There was little justification in research for this movement towards servicing (but see Bacon and Storey 1993, Bassett 1986, Bassett and Cave 1993) and there was even less evidence that it was a meaningful strategy for recruitment and retention of members. Indeed membership figures continued to decline throughout the period up to 1994. Heery (1996:190) points out that declining trade union membership was due to changing contexts and that motivations for joining unions remained based on traditional issues:

Research on union joining indicates that employee's motivations are often instrumental but that that instrumentality is of a traditional nature. Workers continue to join unions or believe unions to be of value because they secure better pay, working conditions and job security, provide protection from arbitrary management, offer representation in disciplinary and grievance cases, and provide legal assistance in the event of injury at work

Nevertheless the view of union members as consumers remained prominent. As previously indicated, within 'new realism' the FTO role emphasized their professional status as an industrial relations expert, set apart from the union membership (Bassett 1986). Comparison with US FTO's, the business agent servicing members of trade unions dominated by business unionism, is evident. These views of union members and FTO's was to come under apparent challenge as US grassroots organising gained influence among the TUC and its affiliate unions.

The re-launch of the TUC

In 1994 the TUC was formally relaunched under a new General Secretary with an agenda of internal reform and external campaigning as a voice for the 'interest of labour'. Underpinning this change was the introduction of contemporary management techniques through 'managerial unionism' (Heery 1998). This was followed by the adoption of two competing and contradictory visions of the future for UK unions, 'Partnership' and 'Organising', combined under the heading, 'New Unionism' (Heery 1998). The dual approach of organising and partnership presented tension and potential for inconsistency in approach (see Heery 1998, Carter and Poynter 1999). Partnership with employers, a hangover from 'new realism', was influenced by European models of social partnership (without the structural support): whilst organising emerged from the aforementioned fact finding visits abroad.

Although having different systems of industrial relations, union traditions and culture, and not in the position of crisis faced by US and Australian trade unions, the TUC seemed to embrace uncritically organising and partnership as the path to union renewal. This was despite assessment on the state of US unions which identified continued decline:

Can we see the future of British trade unions in America today? If so, it looks like a future of declining influence. Membership dropped from 22 million in 1975 to 16 million by 1990 with density today around 15 per cent. . .the USA would seem to provide lessons to avoid rather than emulate

McIlroy 1995:414-415

The 'New Unionism' strategy could be summed up in that unions should seek partnership with good employers and organize against bad employers (Carter and Fairbrother 1998b). Nevertheless formally committed to promoting an organising culture amongst British workers, the TUC held a future vision of unionism firmly rooted in the belief that the apparent success of organising drives in the USA was transferable to the UK.

The Organising Model: a closer look

The organising approach was based on an 'organising model' for building union organisation by dealing with issues and grievances through the promotion of workplace activism as a way to union renewal (Heery 1998). The organising model can be described as 'a proactive bottom up model of collective organisation in which members constantly use innovative techniques to empower themselves' (De Turberville 2004:777). Unlike 'new realism' where members were viewed as passive recipients of union services, in this orientation was a realisation that workers power was not achieved, by competent union business agents (full time officers) or through accommodation with the capitalist state or employers, but by the collective organisation of workers themselves (see Russo and Banks 1996, Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998). The language of organising suggested a return to a more radical past with the building of more self-reliant union organisation at the workplace, echoing the autonomous steward organisation promoted by the TGWU under Jack Jones (Darlington 1994). As a strategy for trade union renewal the 'organising model' had significant implications for relations with and between union members, union FTO's and employers.

Central to the organising model is the notion of union building at the workplace through the mobilisation of members internally and the promotion of grassroots activism more broadly (Heery *et al.* 2000:996). To reiterate it contrasts with a servicing model of trade unionism where FTO's spend their time dealing with servicing issues, such as grievances and disciplinary procedures, at the expense of building the union organisation. Largely reflecting the role of union organisers in the US and Australia, whether the servicing model accurately portrayed the general position of UK FTO's is a contentious point. According to Kelly and Heery (1994:113) the UK FTO was more an enabler as opposed to a servicer and in relation to workplace industrial relations:

... 90 per cent of Officers agreeing with the statement that 'Wherever possible workplace representatives should handle their own collective bargaining'. There was a widespread belief among officers, therefore, that steward organization should be nurtured to the point where routine

negotiations and representation could be handled without recourse to external support

The 'organising model' approach sees the FTO acting as a promoter and supporter of membership activity and not the substitute for it as the 'professional' industrial relations representative.

In the US and Australia the organising model was altering union internal relations and FTO's with some becoming lead organisers fostering and developing workplace organisation (Bronfenbrenner 1997). Given existing UK FTO orientation the adoption of the organising model suggested some refinement of existing practice as opposed to role transformation.

In 1998 the TUC Organising Academy was established with a remit to train new organisers in the skills required to help deliver stated objectives utilising the methods identified within the organising model (Simms and Holgate 2010). The five key objectives of the Organising Academy were to recruit and train a cadre of specialist organisers, increase membership and participation, encourage unions to invest in organising work, encourage expansionism to non-unionised areas and to promote a specific approach to trade unionism encouraging membership involvement (Simms *et al.* 2013:6). More broadly the TUC launched 'Winning the Organised Workplace', (WOW) training courses based on applying the organising model as a national skills training programme aimed to equip union officials and lay representatives with the tools of best practice in organisation and recruitment (see Chapter Five on WOW in Unison).

The Organising Academy was an explicit attempt to 'shake up' the trade union movement by recruiting new people to work in the unions' so that they 'could be agents of a wider cultural change within the union movement' (Simms *et al.* 2013:5). In championing organising over servicing it was accepted that whilst structural economic and political conditions had combined to cause union decline, unions themselves had contributed by focusing on servicing existing members at the expense of organising and recruitment. Despite evidence to the contrary, blame was apportioned to FTO's

and other lay union representatives whose priorities were misplaced (Heery *et al.* 2000). In addition, the narrative of separation of servicing from organising, the need for FTO roles to be transformed and the requirement for specialist organiser roles was all accepted (Simms and Holgate 2010).

Servicing, organising and the full time officer

The prominent trade union services for members are arguably representation at work, collective bargaining and legal support. Trade union members repeatedly cite the importance of support at work and protection as the most important reasons for joining (see Waddington and Kerr 1999, Waddington 2014). It follows that enhancing representational abilities and outcomes should be a top priority or concern in any union renewal strategy. The presentation of contrasting servicing and organising models provided for different approaches or orientations to union representation encouraging passive union membership in the former and activism in the latter. However the idea that servicing was a separate function, secondary in importance to organising, became dominant. Representation of members was to be delegated to lay representatives. In turn, organising itself became loosely defined, and for some, synonymous with recruitment (Simms and Holgate 2008, 2010).

In accepting and adopting such perspectives those responsible for managing trade unions were presented with significant challenges in changing the organisational focus from representation to organising and/or recruitment activity. With recruitment becoming synonymous with organising the inherent conflict of priorities for FTO's is apparent. Institutional priorities of recruitment targets require managers to assert that priority over the workplace issues of existing members and their lay representatives. Furthermore with an 'ongoing decline in the quantity of union representatives' (McIlroy and Daniels 2009:77) a strategy which places more responsibility on an ever dwindling number of those representatives is questionable. Where tensions over the role of FTO's and lay activists have exacerbated in the context of increased central union direction, or member led campaigning (Rooks 2002), resistance from FTO's to the shift from servicing to organising occurs (Fletcher and Hurd 1998). In addition, as

Rooks (2004) was to warn, the problem identified in the USA of 'burn out' of organisers, given the labour intensive nature of organising work, should not be underestimated.

In the UK similar resistance has been found (Daniels 2010): although the reference to Carter (2000) in the case of MSF does not acknowledge that much of the FTO opposition was not to organising work itself, but to the manner in which it was introduced, defined and applied. As Fletcher and Hurd (1998:40) contend 'some application of organising principles to representational work is desirable' but lack of clarity around organising in practice prevails. Furthermore:

Little attention is paid to issues of representation in advance of the shift, and indeed, potential problems are ignored, masked or downplayed. It is the organising itself that takes priority. There is an understanding among many proponents . . . that the abrupt reallocation of resources and staff will inevitably lead to crises in representation . . . and an assumption that organizing locals will adapt and figure out how to handle these challenges as they arise

Fletcher and Hurd 2001:183

A crucial consequence of the drive to organising is:

This nearly single-minded focus on external organizing potentially relegates current members to substandard representation and disenchantment. Even newly recruited members face this fate once the first contract is signed. The problem inherent in the much maligned servicing model, namely a disengaged apathetic membership, are thereby exacerbated

Hurd 2004:11

Ironically, this view mirrors the comments of Muehlenkamp (1991) who, then as an argument for organising, contrasted the different ways workers were treated before and after US unions recruited:

Instead of constantly developing new rank and file leaders, we act like they have all the information and skills they will ever need. Instead of recruiting more leaders, we act like whoever already came forward as leaders at that point are the union's permanent leaders. Instead of targeting active workers to get them more active, we abandon them. Instead of mobilizing workers – now dues-paying members- around issues, we write letters and file grievance forms

The only difference from servicing to organising seemed to be that in organising union FTO's are not supposed to write the letters, file the grievance forms or engage in representation. The crisis in representation which this strategy produces is illustrated by the growth of alternatives to traditional trade union work:

... the network of local coalitions on occupational safety and health (COSH groups) ... continues to function in many cities, trying to fill the void left by unions that have shifted resources into organising at the expense of job safety fights

Early 2009:68

For Hurd (2004:12) the AFL-CIO objective of promoting grassroots activism which would address workers grievances and concerns 'was abandoned at the altar of quantitative recruitment goals'. The rhetoric of organising morphed into a definition which was limited to recruitment activity. However, the narrow objective of membership growth has mostly not been achieved, even by those unions who have made 'a financial commitment to organising' (Hurd 2004:12).

In the UK the specific conditions which provided the context for the apparent organising successes of the SEIU could not be replicated. However, there were some parallels with US experience. The radical rhetoric of organising did not materialise. The TUC's continued emphasis on collaborative approaches through the partnership dimension of 'new unionism' paralleled the pronouncements of collaboration and cooperation with corporate America by the AFL-CIO leadership (McIlroy 2013). Also the apparent existence of a strategic choice for unions between servicing and organising was accepted (Heery 1998) with the FTO role requiring adjusting to organising as opposed to servicing.

Organising for what?

As in Hurd's analysis of the limitations in US organising strategy, concerns were expressed that organising in the UK context would also be limited to recruitment campaigns (Carter and Fairbrother 1998a). In addition, the pre-existing growth in managerialism within UK trade unions (Heery 1996) corresponded with US experience (McIlroy 2013); and in organising saw an opportunity for clear management objectives

limited to recruitment targets, far removed from the potential within the organising model.

De Turberville identifies that for some unions the organising objective is to increase the number of stewards in the workplace and build shop steward networks (De Turberville 2004). Waddington and Kerr saw increasing membership participation and recruitment as the key objectives (Waddington and Kerr 2000). Others look to the importance of membership participation, democratisation and increasing militancy of membership in terms of their demands as union goals (Cohen 2006). In acknowledging that in most cases the objective is the establishment or strengthening of conventional recognition agreements, Simms et al (2013:153) also confirm '... the most important outcome of organising is increasing membership'. Given these differing objectives it is understandable that confusion abounds over organising work. This is significant given Carter's (2006:424) observation that 'the means of renewal affect the end'. Furthermore organising campaigns stem from union leaderships and not organically from workplaces resulting in attempts to implant as opposed to nurture an existing culture (Simms 2007).

The confusion arising from an absence of an identifiable union vision and the tendency for trade union leaders to embrace uncritically ideas for union renewal, it is not surprising that 'organising', despite the pronouncement of it being the 'top priority', has failed to produce tangible results. Questions posed by Fletcher and Hurd (1998: 53) going to the ideological basis of US trade unionism' and relevant to the UK remain unanswered:

Who is identified as the constituency of organized labor? What is the mission of the labor movement? What is the relationship of organized labor to corporate America? How do those in the labor movement deal with issues of globalization and solidarity?

Trade union purpose can vary from concentrating on issues of class and social justice to being limited to the economic interest of workers. Purpose can also be for institutional interests of union bureaucracies (see Chapter Three). Turner (1962) proposed that generalisation of trade union goals is not impossible if recognising they

possess three main characteristics. Firstly, the rationale for a union is that it pursues the interests of its members and is in the last resort controlled by them. If policy priorities are decided by the membership it follows that full time officers become the servants of the membership. This, however, suggests a potential for internal conflict if membership priorities do not coincide with internal management objectives and/or oligarchic priorities of union bureaucracies (see Chapter Three). Secondly, ambiguity in trade union goals seems inherent given consideration of different internal and external constituencies and interests. This can be illustrated in top down approaches to organising, with decisions to mimic US organising decided by senior union officials, and not determined by members at conference after widespread discussion. As Simms and Holgate (2010: 157-158) identify in relation to organising objectives:

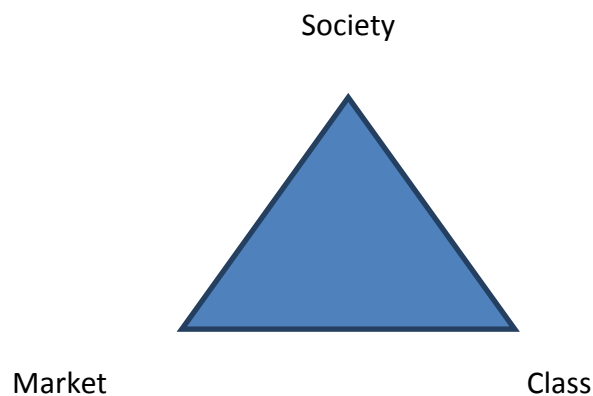
Membership growth, industrial and bargaining strength, culture change and worker self-organisation feature at different times and in different contexts, with different – and often competing – degrees of emphasis

Although in the UK, ‘the primary interest became to establish a set of organising practices that would encourage unions to engage in membership growth activities’ (Simms and Holgate 2010:160).

Thirdly, as Hyman and Fryer (1975) also identify, trade unions can be described as secondary organisations in that their existence presupposes that of economic institutions employing waged labour. It follows that strategies for trade union renewal need to be mindful of relations with employers and the state which frames those relations.

Experience of organising strategies demonstrates that organisational continuity should not carry the assumption that union objectives are not open to reinterpretation or have changing emphasis and priority. More generally Flanders identified the role for trade unions as a ‘sword of justice within the workplace’ (Flanders 1970:15) which connects with protection at work, often cited as the primary reason why workers join unions (Waddington 2014). Organising is complementary when as Simms and Holgate (2010:165) identify, that ‘organising activity must deliver sustainable increases in workplace power’. Furthermore, union strategy requires consideration of the terrain

in which it is applied, including the relationships between FTO's and lay representatives, members, employers and the state. Hyman (2001) illustrates the potential range of trade unionism through the 'geometry of trade unionism' where unions can be positioned at various points between class, market and society at any given time.



UK trade unions historically are positioned between market and class. In contrast US trade unions, reflecting the dominance of business unionism, are positioned between market and society. Hyman points out that 'in times of change and challenge for union movements, a reorientation can occur . . .' (Hyman 2001:5).

Radical or conservative trade unionism

Organising strategies held out the promise of a more radical orientation, with the emphasis on grassroots union organising, UK unions could reposition between class and society. Although following the example of a trade union confederation traditionally positioned more conservatively warrants some scepticism of that potentiality and suggests the direction of travel is towards a more conservative position. Hinting of this possibility, Simms and Holgate (2010:158) point out:

The fact that the TUC were so keen to play down any political agenda around organising meant that, in practice, organising has largely been a 'toolbox' of practices that different unions can apply in different contexts to different ends

Those different contexts include, for large general unions that have resulted from union mergers such as Unison, internal relations which compound the competing internal interests underlining the importance of strategic 'buy – in' to the shift to organising. Without this it is doubtful that the plurality of sectional interests within union structures will support strategic change. The potential for increased conflict of interest when local disputes conflict with national union strategies is evident. Ironically with local workplace unions often portrayed as more militant working against the constraints of conservative national union bureaucracies (Cohen 2006), the shift to organising suggested role reversals between the local and national unions, with the former now resistant to a radical shift in union direction.

Given the organising model emphasis on greater involvement of union rank and file membership in matters of organisation, policy and decision making, the enhancement of workplace and internal union democracy which would follow suggests an inevitable increase in challenges to managerial prerogative creating conditions for raising levels of industrial dispute. However this has proven not to be the case. Furthermore Hyman (2007) emphasises the importance of connecting 'bottom up' and 'top down' trade unionism recognising the realities of organisational capacity and the ability of unions to act strategically. In this respect four crucial areas are identified: the structural capacity to develop common objectives, the intelligence from research, education and information gathering which recognises that knowledge is power, linking intelligence to evaluate and plan strategic objectives and finally the efficacy of attainability of those objectives. Similarly Upchurch *et al.* (2012) contend that union renewal requires the existence of a strategy based on political congruence whereby a 'common political vision between leaders, activists and members' is achieved.

Simms and Holgate (2010) note that the potential for a more radical based trade unionism, through organising strategies, did unite differing trade union constituencies (see also Darlington and Upchurch 2012). However this was in a context where in the UK debates around the politics of organising have been largely limited to, on the one hand the merits of organising versus servicing models (see De Turberville 2004 and 2007a,

Carter 2006) and, on the other, within proponents of the former, the extent to which organising is simply the application of a set of tools in particular circumstances (Simms and Holgate *ibid.*). Nevertheless enhancing the position of workplace rank and file trade unionism has some resonance with earlier analyses of UK trade unions challenging management control in the workplace and beyond (Coates and Topham 1970). Such thinking draws on ideas from syndicalist trade union forms. A parallel with a revival in interest in the US with more radical union forms is apparent. However experience has shown this promise to be over optimistic at best.

In the United States organising has become a vehicle for the assertion of greater control of union leaderships or bureaucracies over existing grassroots organisation. For example Lerner (2002) demonstrated that the much touted Justice for Janitors campaign was directed nationally over the heads of locals in a belief that the first priority for unions at all levels is organising. Milkman and Voss (2004:7) confirm this position 'the key element of J for J (Justice for Janitors) success was the institutional decision not to tolerate local leaders who did not want to organize'.

Lerner (2001) identifies a number of interventions used within the SEIU to assert control by the national leadership and prioritise organising. These include supporting local leaders who are committed to putting organising first, focusing institutional resources they control on that task, willing to create moral and physical crisis in the workplace in order to overcome employer opposition, purge union staffers who don't comply, reorganise locals through merger and trusteeships taking over the running of locals if necessary. Such an approach is seen as undemocratic and centralist by others.

SEIU success is based on a 'bureaucratise to organise' process with top down control over locals and bargaining issues requiring business agent's approval (Cohen 2006:154-5). Similarly:

... union revitalisation efforts promoted recently by some supposedly visionary leaders have relied primarily on bureaucratic consolidation, top down control, and greater reliance on full time officials and staff

Early 2009:38

Furthermore Brecher and Costello (1999:9) propose that the organising strategy adopted by the AFL-CIO was limited in objective to protecting the 'old guard' proponents of business unionism 'the new voice takeover victory of John Sweeney is placed in the shell of the old with the 'fabled rigidity of the AFL-CIO'. Whilst promoting rhetoric of transforming from business unionism to social movement unionism, it would seem that given John Sweeney was elected with the support of key unions, continuity and reinforcing entrenched bureaucracy has taken place.

Continuity in the inherent conservatism of US trade unions is confirmed with experiences of SEIU and UNITE-HERE where the trade-off of the right to strike with employer neutrality in recognition ballots has occurred. These agreements:

... increases the chance for membership gain but workers are relatively uninvolved in the process, and the development of an activist core and tradition so essential to the organising model is potentially discouraged

Dixon and Fiorito 2009:166

Distilling all of this it is clear that for unions to become organising institutions there needs to be a wholesale change in their modus operandi. Trade union organisation itself has to transform its communications, decentralise its decision making structures and develop and deepen its commitment to education and support for shop stewards and the membership more generally. Carter (2000) identifies that there is little if any evidence for individual unions affiliated to the TUC identifying with organising in a comprehensive way. Developing under the guise of organising is an enhanced form of managed activism including recruitment plans; performance management techniques, workplace mapping and branch development plans according to De Turberville (2004). Such techniques have been adopted by Unison and will be considered in more detail in Chapter Five. Contrarily it is these techniques which Waddington and Kerr (2009) offer as evidence that Unison transformed itself into an organising union.

Union organising encouraging workplace membership participation and enhancing the organising responsibilities of the FTO can be delimited or subordinated to a recruitment strategy. In contrast recruiting new members into poorly organised

workplaces with reduced representational support is unsustainable. Crucially the ongoing failure to radicalise trade union education undermines efforts at boosting union activism and confidence:

Activism without education, in the absence of a coherent conceptual framework by which to comprehend the world around one (and without participation in democratic decision-making) is most often dis-empowering, despite the best of intentions. Many unions have yet to confront the challenge of developing and operationalizing a substantial and progressive education program

Kumar and Schenk 2006:55

Twenty years on formal adherence to organising strategies in the United States, Australia and the UK have seen no dramatic upsurge in union fortunes with continued decline in all three union confederations (see Hurd 2004, Bowden 2009, Simms *et al.* 2013). Daniels (2010) points out that for those unions which have apparently embraced organising and commenced some internal transformation there is little evidence of renewal despite some impressive individual campaigns. The overall experience is organising work as presently conceived has failed to find a well of workers clamouring to join trade unions, let alone become activists (see Danford *et al.* 2009). Given this position debates around conservative or radical orientations and union characteristics and objectives remain secondary to the issue of basic organisation. As Danford *et al.* (2009:77) point out:

... until British unions are able to rebuild workplace structures based on a critical mass of union members and activists then the political choice between cooperative unionism and more aggressive oppositional union forms may constitute a false dichotomy

It is nevertheless the orientations themselves which can provide both explanations for, and resolution to, the problems of weakened organisation.

Conclusion

The development of organising and particular successes in the US held out the potential for a more general reversal in union fortunes and the development of new forms of trade unionism with the emphasis on more workplace based participatory

unionism. The context in which the organising model was adopted in the USA was one of crisis for US trade unions. Crucially, the methods based on the organising model championed by the SEIU in the USA were in the context of a different trade union culture; experience and legal framework (Carter et al. 2003). Nevertheless the borrowing of 'in your face' organising tactics from the US promised a radical departure from previous strategies of collaboration. However, the narrative which emerged suggested unions had a strategic choice between organising and servicing their respective memberships.

The choice of organising has a number of implications. One is the reinforcement of forms of managerial unionism which attempt to increase control of union resources, both financial and human. Another is the downgrading of representation - the basic reason union membership - replaced with the priority of recruiting: illustrated in the policy of delegating representational work from FTOs to lay union representatives. What 'organising' is defined as is unclear as are any objectives beyond achieving nationally set membership targets bearing no relationship to local conditions and workplace developments. The prospect of transforming trade unions through a different way of addressing everyday issues of workers has been ignored with potentially significant implications for both the role of the FTO and the nature of trade unions.

The original emphasis within the organising model on membership development and ownership of issues is a shift away from the business unionism of the AFL-CIO, the servicing dominance of the Australian Arbitration system and to a new direction for UK unions. This strategy is partly based on a belief that the FTO is culpable for the failure of UK trade unions to breakout from traditional areas of recognition to organise within the new sectors of the economy. Consequently this also suggests that the daily operation of trade unions was inwardly focused and, by opening out to the non-unionised sectors of the economy, new members would be attracted to new forms of trade union organisation supported by new union officials with a campaigning as opposed to industrial relations background and experience. Such a turn places a

premium on different skills and hence the change to recruitment of external candidates with minimal industrial relations experience. Collective bargaining and grievance representation are no longer as important given the emphasis on recruitment targets. This movement suggests that, rather than changing union practice from conservative business unionism to more radical forms of social movement unionism, organising introduced by union bureaucracies is as Greer (2003) suggests restructuring that bureaucracy.

If it is the case that trade union renewal is best achieved through the adoption of organising then questions in connection with why trade union renewal remains elusive needs placing in the context of the nature of trade unions, relations between differing trade union constituencies and the variability of trade union objectives. These factors highlighted the possibilities of contrasting union forms based on bureaucracy, on the one hand, and those which emphasise workplace rank and file participatory trade unionism. There are some obvious limitations to the introduction of the organising model. Trade unions are not easily malleable: they have formally democratic structures, different and sometimes conflicting policies and objectives, and changing operational emphases. Major organisational and cultural changes require engagement and commitment from all constituent parts. A large general union would have particular issues in gaining agreement given the different interests across occupations and internal union structures. Such questions are relevant and explain the need to consider the nature and sociology of trade union forms.

Experience also suggests that Fairbrothers' (1994,1996) assessment that decentralisation of public services present opportunities for union renewal are over optimistic in light of experience with union avoidance strategies and lack of experience at the local union level (Carter 2004). Furthermore:

Fairbrothers analysis did not sufficiently consider the limited extent to which national unions would transfer resources and support the growth of such workplace based organization

Carter *et al.* 2012:5

On the contrary it confirms previous characterisation of public sector unions as bureaucratic, centralised and remote from local concerns (Fairbrother 1996).

The idea that trade union renewal is best achieved through the adoption of US organising has weakened in recent years supported by the continued decline of unions and reflected in portrayals of it as just one set of techniques that downgrade its importance (Simms et al. 2013). Yet others have attacked its philosophical and practical coherence (de Turberville 2004, 2007). If US style grassroots trade union organising promised to be the panacea for union renewal the causes for its subsequent failure requires examination. Those writers continuing to support it can point to isolated but successful organising attempts and that in the main unions have adopted organising more in rhetoric than reality. One of the reasons for this partial adoption emerging from this chapter is that trade unions comprise different interests and broadly speaking the interests of a bureaucracy predominate shaping initiatives in their own interests. The literature on organising is now extensive but it is as yet not sufficiently informed by a longer term discussion of the nature of trade unions and the social relations within them. These questions are the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter Three: The social relations of trade unions

Introduction

Accounts of organising model influenced strategies, as the answer to trade union decline (see for example Heery 1998, Voss and Sherman 2000, Crosby 2005), or those sceptical of the appropriateness of the organising model (De Turberville 2004, 2007), have in common, no sense of internal trade union dynamics. Even where the need for change is acknowledged trade unions tend to implement it in ways which protect vested interests from the potential consequences of radical union transformation. Full time officers do not necessarily fit within this protected category and, as identified later in the thesis, are subject to changes in responsibilities and priorities given their pivotal position in delivery of union strategies. To reiterate, given the nature of trade unions there has been insufficient appreciation of their ability (even when appearing to embrace change) to resist, or distort initiatives. Examination moreover has to go beyond seeing the cause of failure as simply the result of the position of conservative individuals in leadership positions and to recognise that trade unions as institutions, and the structures within, are inherently resistant to radical reform. This examination inevitably centres on the existence and role of trade union bureaucracy and the extent to which it embraces all full time officers.

Theoretical frameworks can help explain the implications of and prospects for union renewal. Theories of trade unions and industrial relations are important in providing an analytical framework in which future plans and strategies are developed. A failure to theorise structures risks detaching any strategy or plan from its material base. Sociology of trade unions has long counter-posed the interests of bureaucracy and rank and file. The importance of a consideration of bureaucracy should not be underestimated as it 'can permeate the whole practice of trade unionism' (Hyman 1989:158). Trade union renewal, and with it, the prospect of change in trade union formation bringing an influx of new union activism, can threaten and challenge existing arrangements and positions within both union bureaucracy and rank and file.

The chapter commences by examining differing approaches to trade union support and representation of members. It then considers the position of union bureaucracy and Michels' (1962) contention that there is an 'iron law of oligarchy'. This is followed with some critiques of this position but also reference to more recent (from a historical perspective) identification of an emergent trade union lay or semi- bureaucracy. External as well as internal bureaucratic pressures are identified which lead to some recognition of the implications for trade union objectives and organisation.

Approaches to servicing union members

Trade union support or provision of services for members has, as Heery and Kelly (1994) identify, gone through 'three discernible phases in post war Britain', which they describe as professional, participative and managerial forms of trade unionism. The professional phase being dominant from the 1940s to the 1960s, had the role of the FTO as the professional representative, in this period comparable with their US and Australian equivalents, representing and negotiating on behalf of a largely passive union membership.

From the 1960s onwards the development of more participative union forms emerged shifting the role of the FTO to one of facilitating workplace organisation. For FTO's their independence and ability to resist manipulation by employers, of which shop stewards were more susceptible, illustrated the limits of participative trade unionism. Furthermore as Gall (2003:232) was to identify 'FTO's remain important personnel in the creation, prosecution and successful outcomes of unionization and recognition campaigns'.

Whilst professional unionism saw decision making power with the FTO, in contrast participative unionism had the FTO supporting a transfer of that power to the rank and file. By the 1980s a move to managerial unionism is identified with the view emerging of members as consumers of union services and FTOs as a key resource, but one which requires greater direction and management towards managerial objectives. Whilst managerial unionism sees the assertion of managerial prerogative within trade unions and 'implies a transfer of decision making from lay activists to union leaders' (Heery

and Kelly 1994:10), or an enhancing of internal power of union bureaucracies. To reiterate the FTO becomes a key resource to be 'actively managed in delivering services to members' (Heery and Kelly *ibid*). It is in the context of increasing influence of managerial approaches to servicing union members that 'new unionism' emerged.

In the formation of Unison, NALGO was described as a member led union suggesting a participative approach to servicing members. NUPE, in contrast, was officer led, a characteristic of professional unionism. NALGO, NUPE and COHSE had however previously committed to supporting shop stewards networks. In negotiations on its formation Unison aspired to a more managerial approach (see Dempsey 2000). Heery and Kelly (1994:14) predicted that such an approach could lead to 'divestment from the core business of representing members'. The introduction of 'organising' in the 'new unionism' strategy suggested a reversal to a more participative approach to servicing. However the debate on organising and servicing was in the context of a managerial union dominance which questioned the servicing function itself. The importance of member recruitment and retention emphasised in managerial unionism, asserting a key concern of union bureaucracy, was to be the priority (see chapter five). However the retention element was itself to be diluted (see chapter six onwards).

The triumph of bureaucracy

Historically the momentum of bureaucracy in trade unions was identified by S. and B. Webb (1894:15) in their classic analysis of the early trade union movement. The emergence of an officer class separate from the membership had significant consequences:

With the appointment of a General Secretary, and later other full time officials, the foundations for an elite or governing class were created: The setting apart of one man (sic) to do the clerical work destroyed the possibility of equal and identical service by all the members, and laid the foundation for a separate governing class . . . Spending all day at office work, he soon acquired a professional expertise quite out of the reach of his fellow members at the bench or the forge

The development of union delegate democracy saw tensions between FTOs and the lay membership addressed, at least in theory, through a written constitution and rule book, reinforced through strong democratic structures (see S. and B. Webb *ibid*). On occasion where, tensions, or other motivations, led to a potential challenger to the office of the General Secretary, the challenger, however capable, was at a significant disadvantage given the incumbent office holder controlled union communications and was readily available to members through that office. A state of affairs which led to a view that ‘. . . almost every influence in the trade union organisation has tended to magnify and consolidate the power of the General Secretary’ (S. and B. Webb 1894:27).

For Michels (1962), regardless of the strength of internal democracy and union rule book controls, there is an inevitability of union control by an elite cadre of FTOs through the necessity of organisational work: ‘Nominally . . . the acts of the leaders are subject to the ever vigilant criticism of the rank and file’ (Michels 1962:71). However, democratic control of a trade union is illusory with Michels maintaining that democracy and decision making was inevitably dominated by such an elite. For Michels this influence over the union membership results in goal displacement and the gradual emergence of a ruling oligarchy:

It is organization which gives birth to the domination of the elected over the electors, of the mandatories over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators . . . Who says organization says oligarchy

Michels 1962:15

Michels explained oligarchy in terms of, “. . . the control of a society or an organization by those at the top, is an intrinsic part of bureaucracy or large scale organisation” (Michels 1962:15). For Michels trade unions and socialist political parties, whilst well-meaning, inevitably succumb to the iron law of oligarchy, a characteristic of any complex social system. The requirement for delegated democracy whilst allowing for a form of democracy fails to protect from the ‘formation of an oligarchical camerilla’ (Michels *ibid*: 64). As trade union organisation expanded so employing their own staff heightened existing oligarchical tendencies:

In the trade union movement, the authoritative character of the leaders and their tendency to rule democratic organizations on oligarchic lines, are even more pronounced than in the political leaders

Michels 1962:159

The paradox that members of a union would want the union to be effective provides the condition for strong organisation implying strong leadership. It is that organisation which inevitably produces an oligarchy given the aristocratic tendencies of those in positions of leadership. The members become directed by the professional full time officers as 'the technical specialization that inevitably results from all extensive organization renders necessary what is called expert leadership' (Michels *ibid*:70). The impact on the FTO is significant given the transition from rank and file workers representative to bureaucratic administrator is judged on practical competence stemming from the expectations of the paid role. In addition the FTO's direct responsibility for their organisation's security and survival can inevitably produce some caution particularly with actions or behaviour which threatens current and established bargaining relationships.

Michels (*ibid*: 191) also proposed that the separation of the FTO from the union membership is not restricted to their respective positions within the union structure but extended by the developing differences in social position:

In every bureaucracy we may observe place-hunting, a mania for promotion, and obsequiousness towards those on whom promotion depends; there is arrogance towards inferiors and servility towards superiors

Furthermore, 'what was initiated by the need for organization, administration and strategy is completed by psychological determination' (Michels *ibid*: 205) in that the apathy of the masses is coupled by the leaders desire for power 'the principal cause of oligarchy . . . is to be found in the principal of leadership' (Michels *ibid*: 364). As unions become larger and more influential so the paid officials become persons of influence courted by the ruling elites and their social position transcends from that of the working class, where lies the membership, to the power elites within the ruling class. Eventually there develops a position of permanent leaders which Michels argues is

'tantamount to the exercise of dominion by the representative over the represented' (Michels *ibid*: 77). Of particular relevance in examining large unions such as Unison is the further claim that:

The more extended and the more ramified the official apparatus of the organization, the greater the number of its members, the fuller its treasury, and the more widely circulated its press, the less efficient becomes the direct control exercised by the rank and file, and the more is this control replaced by the increasing power of committees

Michels *ibid*:71

Organisation consolidates the position of leaders and led. 'It may be enunciated as a general rule that the increase in the power of the leaders is directly proportional with the extension of the organisation' (Michels *ibid*: 70-71). Conversely the stronger the organisation the weaker the democracy becomes as '... strong organization needs an equally strong leadership' (Michels *ibid*: 73)

The idea that union members can be transformed from passive to active members is questioned by Michels who viewed union membership as apathetic and indifferent to union policy and democracy as they are to politics more generally (Michels *ibid*: 86). This stance has implications for union organising strategies as does Allen's (1954:15) position of union legitimacy coming, not from internal union democracy, but union delivery of policy in dealing with employers.

... the end of trade union activity is to protect and improve the general living standards of its members and not to provide workers with an exercise in self-government

This apathy of the masses, FTO control of communication and administration and the often held veneration of leaders, all combine to create the conditions for oligarchical control. The implications are such that:

In the trade union, it is even easier than in the political labor organization, for the officials to initiate and to pursue a course of action disapproved of by the majority of workers they are supposed to represent

Michels *ibid*: 159

Where dissatisfaction may result in a desire to remove leaders the system of bureaucracy protects their position and is strengthened 'by the increase in the tasks imposed by modern organization' (Michels *ibid*: 190), so incorporating others into the bureaucracy. Organization becomes an end in itself with Michels (1962:284) prophetically contending that:

What is above all necessary is to organize, to organize unceasingly, and that the cause of the workers will not gain the victory until the last worker has been enrolled in the organization

Given organisational size, the potential for competing objectives both within the membership rank and file, and between the FTO led oligarchy, can heighten the risk of the interests of the representative dominating those of the represented. However these perspectives fail to recognise the importance of democratic participation and effective representation to achieve such objectives.

Iron Law or Tendency?

There have been a number of challenges to Michels' framework, both theoretical and practical. Hyman (1971b) has disputed the unilinear movement towards oligarchy, arguing that while it might be an observable tendency, it is far from an iron law. To paraphrase Michels, Hyman's position might be characterised as 'Who says organisation/bureaucracy says democratic resistance' (see Hyman 1971b). Hyman cites Gouldner's (1955) argument that the lack of democracy in trade unions is due to capitalism and not any iron law:

It is the pathos of pessimism rather than the compulsions of rigorous analysis that leads to the assumption that organisational constraints have stacked the deck against democracy. For on the face of it there is every reason to assume that "the underlying tendencies which are likely to inhibit the democratic process" are just as likely to impair authoritarian rule . . . There cannot be an iron law of oligarchy, however, unless there is an iron law of democracy

Hyman 1971:33

Similarly for Anderson (1967:276) the lack of democracy in trade unions is to be understood in terms of 'the nature of the system into which they are inserted: that is

capitalism.’ Within capitalism ‘organisations for the working class can become against that class . . . power for as power over’ (Anderson 1967:276).

Countervailing tendencies to oligarchy come from , ‘the implications of workers ‘instrumental’ attitudes to their unions, normative pressures towards democratic practice, and the distinctive context of different levels of organisation’ (Hyman 1971b:29). Whilst improving union organisation, administration and delivery of union policy, bureaucracy nevertheless does not overcome competing and conflicting interests and objectives. These internal union relations are often presented as a dichotomy of on the one hand bureaucracy, and on the other ‘rank and file’. Hyman (1989:158) defines the former as:

in large measure a question of the differential distribution of expertise and activism: of the dependence of the mass of union membership on the initiative and strategic experience of a relatively small cadre of leadership – both ‘official’ and unofficial

The instrumental attitudes of union members mean that an ineffective union will lead to union leaders being ‘swept aside by a democratic uprising of the ‘rank and file’ (Hoxie 1923 quoted in Hyman 1971:30). This assumes the influence of the oligarchy is not all encompassing. An alternative reaction to such failure could be that workers may decide to end their union membership.

In examining relations between stewards and union members at Ford Motors Beynon (1975:202) noted that apathy ‘explains everything and nothing’: rather it is the gap between stewards and members which comes through the sustained activism of the former. Organising strategies held out a promise of narrowing that gap or at least increasing the numbers of activists and strengthening union democracy. The pressure on FTOs is necessary to maintain legitimacy of representation and to resist claims of unrepresentativeness which at times may be alleged by management and sections of the public, as well as the union membership (see Coleman 1956 quoted in Hyman 1971:31). Furthermore, in regard to becoming FTOs, Hyman (1971:31) asserts that:

Most leaders of British unions achieve office only after many years as lay activists; and those at least who have been accustomed to democratic control are likely to have been socialised to define their role in a manner which precludes the extremes of oligarchic practice

Trade unions are both defined, but also inhibited, by collective struggle. Whilst it may be the case that union activists and/or paid officials agitate for grievances and disputes in order to achieve certain goals, in the process of prosecuting disputes the position of the official transforms from agitator to mediator in order to achieve resolution of the grievance or dispute. Moreover, the processes through which such matters are resolved are normally set around procedural norms of industrial relations. This is the context to which the FTO is employed and what is expected by both the institution and the membership, although such expectations are far from uniform or static.

Kelly and Heery's (1994:19) examination of local FTOs found that their work is primarily to 'attempt to establish vigorous, self-supporting and relatively autonomous workplace trade unionism'. Notwithstanding the degree of autonomy a cautious approach to grievance resolution is often required given the need to maintain relations with employers and the state. FTOs have been essentially employed for that purpose and, of significance for organising strategies, not to mobilise members. Consequently they 'frequently perform a conservative role in periods of membership activism and struggle' (Hyman 1989:55). Furthermore, Pearce, referring to the previous work of S. and B. Webb, points to the broader conservative nature of the FTO with the development of "a whole network of social relations separating them off from their original class" (Pearce 1959: 15).

The labelling of FTOs as bureaucrats is, according to Hyman (1989), a term of abuse which merely seeks to use the union full time officer as a scapegoat for the inherent contradictions within trade unionism. The corollary of the contention that FTOs are organic parts of a bureaucracy holding a privileged position is that their interests are antipathetic to those of the union membership. As part of the permanent union elite their priorities come to dominate those of the membership and encourage the

tendency to adopt more conservative policies. Hence as Hyman (1989:150) was later to observe, FTOs:

. . . though often politically and socially more advanced or progressive than many of their members, frequently perform a conservative role in periods of membership activism and struggle

However, policies are context bound and may shift sharply in periods of crisis. Voss and Sherman (2000) propose that the response to the crisis facing US unions was evidence of the breaking of the 'iron law of oligarchy'. In emphasising cultural change with workplace organising and an influx of outsiders with innovative ideas the position of FTOs and members is transformed:

In the labor movement, rather than democracy paving the way for the end of bureaucratic conservatism, the breakdown of bureaucratic conservatism paves the way for greater democracy and participation, largely through the participatory education being promoted by the new leaders.

Voss and Sherman 2000:344

Union organising strategies, which some claim are influenced by earlier radical union forms, by prioritising organising over servicing or representation may provide confirmation of such a position.

Trade union focus on grassroots organising illustrates the distinction that can be made between the union at the workplace, highlighting the importance of shop floor trade unionism, and the formal structures of trade unions. Michels ignores the former by focusing on the latter. Yet it is at the workplace where trade union effectiveness is often assessed by members and where vibrant and effective democracy can inhibit bureaucratic tendencies. Beynon (1975) writing at a particular moment of British class relations identified shop stewards as crucial to the defence of workers interests and resistance to managerial prerogative. Whilst workplace unionism may have largely economistic objectives it also involves regular challenge and resistance to managerial control (Beynon *ibid*). Whilst there was also in this response a potential for fragmentation of workers, and with it a level of vulnerability through isolationist tactics, this was addressed through joint shop stewards organisation.

Lay or semi bureaucracy

Chapter one referred to the 1968 Donovan Commission report and the ensuing pressures to incorporate lay union representatives within formal union structures and industrial relations procedures. The report followed a period of growing numbers of independent shop stewards, often adopting a militant approach to industrial relations. As conditions tightened Hyman (1989:149-150) raised concerns that the incorporation of shop stewards into official union structures through facility time, growth of procedural resolution to disputes was leading to the extension of bureaucratic relations. Consequently considerations of union bureaucracy should not be limited to the separation of full time officials from the rank and file but should also examine the relations of convenors and other union lay officials as:

... those continuously engaged in a representative capacity perform a crucial mediating role in sustaining tendencies towards an accommodative and subaltern relationship with external agencies (employers and state) in opposition to which trade unions were originally formed.

Beynon (1975:206) had earlier identified that union stewards are 'torn between the forces of representation and bureaucratisation'. Trade union development in the UK is framed within a duality in which trade unions are autonomous bodies but also rely on employers for recognition and facilities, a factor that exposes trade unions to a measure of employer constraint (Hyman 1989:157). The movement towards the 'professionalization' of lay union representatives through formal trade union training providing expertise in procedures as opposed to member mobilisation reinforces the technical, procedural resolution to workplace disputes and grievances (Holford 1994).

Post Donovan, the consolidation of a hierarchy within shop steward organisations has also been achieved partly through 'The tightening of internal management controls and the introduction of new payment systems, job evaluation structures, 'productivity' agreements and formalised negotiating and disciplinary procedures ...' (Hyman 1989:152). As Hyman (1989:154) further explains:

A key mediating role is now performed by a stratum of shop steward leaders who have become integrated into the external union hierarchies

and have at the same time acquired the power status and influence to contain and control disaffected sections and sectional stewards.

These developments led to what Hyman (1989:158) labels a semi-bureaucracy within union structures:

semi bureaucracy might seem appropriate to designate the stratum of lay officialdom on whom full time union functionaries are considerably dependant but who in turn may be dependent on the official leadership.

The rank and file shop steward, rather than being the advocate of workplace union building, becomes conservative and resistant to shopfloor pressure, illustrating the inherent centralising tendencies within shop stewards organisation. Whilst organisation may not automatically lead to oligarchy it does mean discipline and routinisation 'channelling and containing workers resistance to the exploitation of their labour' (Hyman 1989:157). The balance between autonomy and incorporation can vary but incorporation of the shop floor within trade union structures suggests a shift to a 'corporatist pole' (Hyman 1989:157).

Strategies that encourage membership mobilisation and activism threaten incumbent shop stewards due to the increased potential for the emergence of new activists and may not be complementary with corporatist arrangements, questioning as they do current practice and relations with the employer. Consequently resistance to organising strategies could be from elements within the existing union activist base. More broadly a union oligarchy, if one exists, will have an interest in managing such strategies in the longer term interest. Policies in union organising strategies may therefore be contentious and problematic for internal and external relations:

The politics of trade unionism constitute a complex totality highly resistant to major strategies of radicalisation and democratisation- which to be effective must go hand in hand.

Hyman 1989:16

Hyman's thesis has recently been challenged by Upchurch and Darlington (2011) in an analysis grounded in a classical Marxist framework. By separating out the position of senior national union full time officers, being 'primarily concerned

with the few dozen individuals who are the principal national officials of the larger unions in Britain' (Upchurch and Darlington *ibid*: 4), they attempt to reassert a more traditional version of the scope of bureaucracy. Concentrating on national union officials carries an emphasis on the separation from the union rank and file. In a description which Hyman (1989) would not contest, Upchurch and Darlington (*ibid*: 3-4) point to the manifestation of bureaucracy through:

a separation of representation from mobilisation, a hierarchy of control and activism and the detachment of formal mechanisms of policy and decision making from the experience of members.

Furthermore Upchurch and Darlington (*ibid*: 4) assert a number of sociological and political factors which merit separation of FTOs with their own separate interests from the 'rank and file':

Their specific social role as intermediary and mediator between capital and labour, their substantial material benefits, and their political attachment to social democracy.

These elements provide the context in which arises the need to consider the role played by FTOs in the bargaining process and their 'power relationship with union members' (Upchurch and Darlington *ibid*: 4). Regardless of the relational position of FTOs their existence relies on the existence of the union whose function derives from employers and the state. Radical programmes beyond reform are therefore against the interest of the union FTO, regardless of their individual political view. For Upchurch and Darlington key to a more radical trade union form is in the organisation of rank and file union members whose stake in maintaining existing social order is less inherent given '... the rank-and-file may seek to question the value of the institutions that constrain their struggle for self-improvement' (Upchurch and Darlington *ibid*:8).

Straining their own framework, however, they go on to claim the potential for alliances between some FTOs and representatives within the rank and file cutting across hierarchical levels in supporting left caucuses and policies. An example is provided in the PCS union where:

there is some evidence that one of the reasons for the unions recent organising and recruitment success has been the establishment of a left leaning 'political congruence' between a critical mass of activists at workplace level and the national union leadership

Upchurch and Darlington *ibid*: 12 (also see Upchurch et al 2008)

Nevertheless despite congruence they acknowledge that prevailing conditions have created a climate in which lay representatives can 'display similar features to that of the FTO' (Upchurch and Darlington *ibid*: 13), they continue:

This process has been reinforced by the decline in workers struggles, lack of rank-and-file confidence vis-a-vis management, decline in the number of onsite stewards (with some reps effectively covering a number of different geographical work locations), increase in the ration of members to stewards, longer average tenure of office than previously, and an ageing of union representatives

Upchurch and Darlington *ibid*: 13

For Upchurch and Darlington, Hyman's analysis of extended bureaucratisation fails to consider that the position of the lay representative which, although increasingly dependent on, as opposed to independent of the FTO, can be reversed given changing conditions and with the maintenance of democratic accountability which provides for the potential for an influx of new stewards. Of course if successful, union organising strategies contribute to creating the conditions for that influx, in doing so having the potential to unsettle existing arrangements between lay representatives and FTOs.

Upchurch and Darlington (*ibid*: 14) maintain that it is the importance of position and the 'underlying fundamental cleavage of interests' which determine relations between bureaucracy and rank and file and that Hyman's analysis both overstated tendencies to bureaucratisation and underplayed the countervailing forces. Hyman's perspective was not directly empirically evidenced, although it came no doubt from a long period of close study of trade unions. Nor have the perspectives been widely tested as a period of relative quiescence has seen little industrial action and few conflicts that have exposed open tensions within unions. One exception is Carter *et al.* (2012) in their study of PCS at HMRC which

confirmed how interests can differ between national and local union constituencies. Given its current left-wing credentials PCS is a good testing ground for the position of Upchurch and Darlington with its encouragement of workplace organisation and militancy. Yet even in the case of PCS conflict emerges between national and local union priorities and both full time and national lay officers were in conflict with the direct wishes of a militant membership.

The accession of control of the union by an openly left-wing, socialist tendency saw the formal abandonment of partnership working with HMRC. However, the national union focus became pay and opposition to privatisation; while a history of lack of workplace bargaining saw the selective introduction of lean processes. The subsequent experience of 'lean' at a local level resulted in widespread opposition. Expressed by the affected rank and file through challenges at local level, and with motions submitted to PCS conference; resolutions passed calling for national action in opposition to lean were largely ignored by the national leadership. Subsequent disputes supported by members at a local level were not met with appropriate response by a national union, whose strategy of opposition to privatisation was partly based on presenting HMRC as efficient and competitive, and therefore able to undermine arguments for outsourcing. However the conflict was not simply between senior national full time officers and the rank and file. Lay officials, regarded by Upchurch and Darlington as part of the rank and file, were equally tied to a national perspective and similarly unresponsive to demands for action.

Bureaucratic priorities at a national level whether they be organising strategy, pay bargaining or maintaining 'good' industrial relations, can be seen as remote to those of the membership (Stewart and Martinez Lucio 1998). However not only can national officials play a conservative role, lay officers too can still be '... drawn into a web of cooperation with management the corollary of which is a mediating role during conflict' (Carter et al 2012:22). Given the potential for intra union conflict, whether between bureaucracy and rank and file or conflicting national and local priorities,

organising strategies require significant levels of support from different internal interests. The implication is top down initiatives, such as in the case of MSF, (Carter 2000), have little prospect of successful implementation let alone realising objectives if not supported throughout the union organisation.

Conclusion

Inquiries into organising have underestimated the constraints on trade unions identified by a sociology of trade unions sensitive to the control exercised by FTOs and beyond. Whether or not an 'iron law' exists, the potential for oligarchic control in trade unions is inherent. For Hyman (1989:149) the debate about bureaucracy reflects 'a genuine and important problem within trade unionism'. Carter *et al.* (2012:23) identify that 'Bureaucracy is not a caste made up of particular posts but a series of relationships that . . . extend, if unevenly through lay officials'. Furthermore rather than debate the fixed boundaries of bureaucracy it is important to 'focus on a synthesis of theoretical concerns and empirical investigations of relations in process' (Carter *et al.* 2012:23).

This analysis raises the importance of identifying the interests trade union strategy serves given internal stratification of power. The effectiveness of organising strategy can be masked within ambiguous or uncertain objectives. The proliferation of trade union mergers from the 1980s onwards, including that of Unison, raises questions of whether such mergers primarily protected the interests of trade union elites and increased oligarchic control extended through organising strategies.

The relation between the FTO and shop steward is significant in the implementation of organising strategy. The FTO may be presented with a choice of challenging or preserving relations with the shop steward. The demand for representation may be more deep seated and legitimate than suggested. This view questions the contention that a cadre of independent minded shop stewards is waiting to break off the shackles of a conservative industrial agenda and win members to the union through more radical ideas. As Gramsci (1977 quoted in Hyman 1989:161) proposed:

The trade union is not a predetermined phenomenon. It becomes a determinate institution, i.e. it takes on a definite historical form to the extent that the strength and will of the workers who are its members impress a policy and propose an aim that define it

Objectives of organising strategies, their relevance and the interests they serve, the impact on FTOs, including relations with their national counterparts, as well as lay representatives and their consequences for union effectiveness, from all requires analysis. Specifically the position of the FTO as either servant of the union membership or authoritative emissary of union bureaucracy/oligarchy has not been considered in research into union organising strategies. Nor has the emergent union lay or semi-bureaucracy and the threat posed to it by potential union renewal been given due consideration. These are some of the problems for trade union organising strategies which the literature review poses and to which the case study approach suggests a method for gaining answers.

Chapter Four Methodology

Introduction

The previous chapters have identified how trade union renewal, whether attempted by grassroots workplace organising, or by utilising the potential presented by the decentralisation of collective bargaining, faces considerable internal obstacles not least of which is the inherent conservatism of trade unions. Most theories of renewal and approaches to organising have neglected both this latter aspect and the key role of FTOs as either advocates for, or resistors to, trade union innovation. These gaps in the extensive research on union organising strategies require a specific focus on the position of the FTO. Furthermore, the need to explore the role of the FTO requires the evaluation of both their relations with other trade union constituencies and with employers. Given these objectives the case study approach, adopting semi-structured interviews as the main line of inquiry for data gathering, incorporating perspectives, observations and experiences of FTOs (and others), was deemed most appropriate. The part auto-ethnographic approach added to the robustness of the data and research findings. The research was underpinned by a critical realist approach given this philosophy offers explanation and understanding based on a recognition that, whilst the objective world exists independently of peoples' perspectives and observations, their subjective interpretations influence how the world is perceived and experienced (see Fleetwood 2004, O'Mahoney and Vincent 2014): specific examples of critical realist approaches to examination of trade unions includes Lane and Roberts (1971) and Carter (1986).

The chapter commences with further justification for the adoption of critical realist ontological and epistemological positions. Justification for the methodology and research methods used to address the thesis question is then provided. The strengths and weaknesses of the methodology and methods used - a qualitatively based case study - will be considered together with the reasoning for the exclusion of other potential approaches to data capture. In doing so the chapter will confront issues of generalizability which arise as a significant critique of case study research (Kennedy 1976). The tools used for data analysis are outlined and an explanation as to how the

analysis of data collated was undertaken is provided. The primary sources providing the data came by way of semi structured interviews and focus group discussions. This was complemented by further examination of critical incidents, field notes, ongoing participant observation and access to internal union communications. Explanation for the selection of Unison, and specifically 'A' Region, for the research inquiry and comment on the contribution by interviewees and focus group members are made. Finally some elucidation on the ethical questions arising from this research together with consideration of the part auto-ethnographic approach is provided.

Ontology, Epistemology and Philosophical debates

Ontology is 'concerned with what we believe to be social reality' (Blaikie 2000:8). Traditional ontological positions tend to divide between, on the one hand, realism or objectivism in which social phenomena have an existence that is independent of social actors and, on the other hand a constructivist view in which:

Social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors. It implies that social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision

Bryman 2001:16

However neither realism nor social constructivism can compensate for the inherent bias within their approaches. This is the failing that critical realism attempts to address. Clark (2008) explains that critical realism views reality as objective existing independent of individuals. Given the objectivity of the world, the subjectivity of interpretations ensures they are not infallible, are subject to empirical scrutiny and can be challenged or rejected. Similarly, Edwards (2015:2) asserts that '... there exists a reality which is in principal knowable; though all knowledge is necessarily provisional and contested'.

From these basic ontological premises there also arise epistemological issues. Blaikie (2000:8) defining epistemological processes as:

The possible ways of gaining knowledge of social reality, whatever it is understood to be. In short, claims about how what is assumed to exist can be known

How we came to know what we know gives rise to theories of knowledge, methods and validation processes. Competing epistemological positions include two of the more important paradigms, positivism and interpretivism. Positivism can be said to derive from an epistemological position advocating the application of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond (Grix 2002). In contrast, at the other extreme of the epistemological continuum, Bryman (2001:12-13) defines interpretivism as being:

... predicated on the view that a strategy is required that respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action

However the dichotomy presented by these positions suggests that there are alternate worlds when in reality the social world consists of related entities, stratified at different levels, all of which add up to more than the sums of their parts (Mahoney and Vincent 2014). Consequently the study of social structures such as trade unions requires deep consideration of the powers at play, the structure of the union and the mechanisms from which they were created which goes beyond mere recordable events (positivist) or discourse (constructionist) positions. From a critical realist position (see below) the thesis seeks to both describe and analyse union organising strategies and the relationship with union full time officers.

Realist ontology is normally associated with quantitative, positivist methodologies and constructivism with qualitative ones. Such approaches have been used to study trade unions but largely fail to recognise the possibilities for deeper understanding of union strategies for renewal. Consequently the research was approached on the basis of critical realism. Following Pawson and Tilley's (1997) emphasis on the importance in research of investigating relationships, contexts and outcomes for building ontological depth, the research addresses the requirement to explain a social reality based on

differing interpretations and beliefs of Unison staff and activists in a context of Unison structures and strategy that confront them as a given. A critical realist approach can capture the complexity of trade unions as organisations and the positions within them of FTOs and others, their relations and how they impact on perceptions of reality. This relationship between perceptions and structure is influenced by individual's own locations and roles. Power – which may be implicit or explicit in social relations- is here given a material base.

Trade union structures and strategy as an objective reality within a critical realism paradigm can affect other realities. Individuals within trade unions have their own experiences, perceptions and interpretations which offer the researcher fertile ground for explanations and theories about the mechanisms and structures which underpin reality. In critical realism knowledge gained is context laden which allows for further challenging through research. The complexity of trade unions and the multiplicity of mechanisms within trade union organisation warrant such a position. As Ackroyd and Karlsson (2014:21) assert ' . . . although organized social life is undoubtedly complicated, it is not impossible to develop reliable accounts of it from research activities'. This requires the gathering of data which arises from deep questioning of individual interpretations, perceptions and motivations. How FTOs and others in the Unison structure perceive and interpret their work priorities and approaches are crucial to help explain the impact of union renewal strategies. The conclusions which are drawn from the research cannot be placed within a notion of precise forecasting or modelling as in natural sciences but are more indicative of the consequences of union organising strategies both for the role of the FTO and the union organisation itself.

Research strategy: justification in the case study approach

A qualitative as opposed to quantitative methodology was adopted given the nature of the research and the ontological and epistemological presuppositions. Qualitative methodology determines what exists as opposed to what is quantified and was appropriate to explore the complex relations within trade unions. Strauss and Corbin (1998:11) also assert:

Qualitative methods can be used to explore substantive areas about which little is known or about which much is known to gain novel understandings. In addition qualitative methods can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes and emotions that are difficult to extract through more conventional research methods

If it was the case that the research was merely limited to the exploration of recruitment levels, density levels or numbers of activists as a proportion of members than quantitative methods may have been more appropriate. However the inquisitorial nature of the research did not lend itself to a quantitative methodology (see Bryman 2012). The use of the case study as the method of inquiry enabling the researcher to obtain deeper insight into the subject is entirely consistent with such a methodological approach: although on the point of ability to generalise from the findings, a prominent criticism of the case study method, justification is made below.

Denscombe (2010:52) contends that the strategy of a case study approach provides for a focus on, “a particular phenomenon with a view to providing an in depth account of events, relationships, experiences or processes occurring in that particular instance”. Furthermore, ‘the case study is particularly well suited to researching motives, power relations or processes that involve understanding complex social interaction’ (Kitay and Callus 1998:104). The nature of trade unions and the position of full time officers within, the need to consider the different relational positions, inherent tensions and conflict which can emerge from the FTO’s position; whether with managers, national officials or lay activists, lend suitability to the case study approach. FTOs, and lay representatives, can have different agendas at different times to those in union leaderships. Consequently FTOs can mould or shape strategy in trade unions to their own purpose. With the identification in chapter three of the potential for opposition or distortion of strategy the case study is of particular use for the analysis of bureaucracy (see Ackroyd and Karlsson 2014:24)..

Sociological theory provide a contextual background for explaining the nature of trade unions; specifically the existence of a conservative union bureaucracy permeating throughout trade union structures inherently resistant to the radical change suggested by organising strategies. The case study helps to *explain* why certain outcomes happen

- not just what those outcomes are. Despite the priority placed on organising work by Unison and other trade unions, union membership continues to fall (see chapter nine). The approach allows the research to explore this problem and to suggest avenues for further research inquiry.

Given the narrow focus of a case study approach on a single unit of analysis two main criticisms emerge. Firstly, in relation to questions of the ability to broaden out and apply the findings more generally the problem of 'external validity', i.e. 'the extent to which the research findings can be extrapolated beyond the immediate research sample' (Johnson and Duberley, 2000:46) arises. In other words, the case study is located in the specific instance as opposed to the general. A second criticism is that those findings are often limited to description of the phenomenon or instance of study thus reducing the possibility for applying more generalisations of the findings.

In terms of the first criticism the issue of specificity can be overemphasised because trade unions are similarly constructed operating within a common framework of industrial relations. Moreover, from a strategic standpoint there are commonalities - most have conducted internal examinations to assess and change their approaches to union work. The Unison organising strategy emerged from the TUC where at the time Unison was the largest union affiliate. It is unquestionable that Unison formally embraced the strategy espoused by the TUC, a strategy that was itself influenced by US and Australian trade union confederations (see Chapter two). Similarly as with the TUC, Unison also supported employer partnerships borrowing the language of European unions if not arguing for the institutional frameworks that act as a bulwark for such relations. Trade union responses have a degree of similarity given comparable internal structures or morphology. The same pressures and relations, not least in the position of the FTO, are inherent in large general trade unions and many have adopted parallel strategies and would conceivably experience similar tensions/factionalism arising from similar structures. On the second point this research goes beyond a mere description of union work a charge that could be lodged against Watson's (1988) work on union FTOs. The research here provides both analysis and evaluation of organising

strategies in Unison (see chapters six to nine). Consequently the findings have wider theoretical purchase beyond the case study organisation enabling for some theoretical generalisation (see Eisenhardt 1989).

Ultimately the case study approach allows for the adoption of multiple variables (in this case semi –structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation, documentary analysis and field notes) to support the research findings: that is data validations through triangulation (see Denscombe 2010, see Denzin below on triangulation). Furthermore, the case study allows for the improvement of the research design in light of emergent themes and potentially fruitful avenues of investigation not initially known. Hence, in this instance, the development of a national recruitment campaign emphasising the role of Unison as a servicing union and the regional initiative around ‘operation workplace’ - both highly relevant to the research investigation were incorporated into the study (see Chapters Six and Eight) and are consistent with Eisenhardt’s (1989:539) claim that ‘these adjustments allow the researcher to probe emergent themes or take advantage of special opportunities which may be present in a given situation’.

Data capture

In this case the research tools adopted included semi structured interviews initially with Unison FTOs. However, given the research was considering the broader issue of strategy and how that related to, and was influenced by, approaches of FTOs, it was considered essential to give some attention to those layers of staff and lay representatives who would be affected by the organising strategy with the apparent change in the FTO role. So, interviews were also conducted with regional management, senior national officials, staff providing administrative support and Unison branch secretaries as well as other lay representatives. In all thirty employees were interviewed including eleven Regional Organisers (Table 4.1).

The approach to the interviews adopted was consistent with that identified by Smith and Elger (2014:117) in that:

Interviews involve the interviewer and respondent engaging in a fluid interactive process to generate a set of responses which formulate perspectives, observations, experiences and evaluations pertinent to an overall research agenda

The semi structured interview approach has the advantage of producing data which has depth, detail and is based on the insight of the interviewee. It provides opportunity for the researcher to ensure that the data gathered is accurate and precise and therefore has validity (Denscombe 2010:146). Whilst the researcher has control over the broad subject matter this method allows for a large degree of flexibility, which in this case enabled an iterative process with review and amendment of the original research plan. This demonstrated the advantage of such an approach when compared with more highly structured interviews which limit the opportunity for participants to offer points of view and explanation for data capture (Rubin and Babbie 2001:407) or unstructured interviews which can allow for the participant to set the agenda and weaken the focus of the research (Denscombe 2010).

Given the subject in question was also both current the problematic nature of questions requiring historical recall was not at issue. Furthermore, whilst the semi structured interview process can be time consuming, it is more likely in these circumstances to provide deep and accurate information than methods such as the survey (Bryman and Bell 2007). In this case the interviews produced a rich source of primary data which formed the main basis for the research findings. From the Regional Organiser interviews, the existence of contrasting approaches to union work, categorised as traditional and prototypical, became evident. The interviews took from fifty minutes to one hour and forty five minutes to complete with a median average of one hour fifteen minutes.

Table 4.1 list of interviewees by category

Regional Organiser	11
Regional Manager	3
Area Organisers	7
Local Organisers	4
Administrative staff	3
National Officers	2

Branch Secretaries	2
Branch Chair	1
Total	33

This activity was followed by three focus group discussions, including the EDC national committee; with twenty three experienced lay representatives each lasting approximately two hours. This enabled capture of information from a wider group providing for examination of how organising strategy is perceived and constructed by those with common experience enabling for peers to challenge or affirm data and giving the opportunity for elicitation of points not previously considered (Bryman 2012). This process allowed for, within the planned timeframe, significant contribution from Unison lay representatives at the ‘sharp end’ of organising strategy. This was of particular relevance given emerging differences in approach to branch support from FTOs and differing expectations of that support at branch, regional and national level. As Walliman (2006) identifies, the roundtable discussion or focus group still allows for in depth analysis of a subject where the participants have a common interest or experience - in this case Unison lay representatives. The focus groups provided an opportunity for ‘common sense’ perspectives of union support for branches in the context of organising strategies to be tested, corroboration of other data and were important to the process of triangulation.

Table 4.2 Focus group Attendees

‘A’ region Branch Secretaries	5
‘A’ region Experienced Stewards	13
Other region Branch Secretaries (EDC)	2
Other region Experienced Stewards (EDC)	3
Total	23

Ongoing observation of staff meetings, field notes recorded during my own work and examination of internal documents also contributed to the data for consideration. The documents analysed included Unison communications to members and staff from national and regional offices, regular updates from Head Office, pronouncements of the union leadership on organising and recruitment as well as strategy documents and

data on recruitment and activist numbers. This accords with various prescriptions for the use of multiple data collection methods:

If each method leads to different features of empirical reality, then no single method can ever capture all the relevant features of that reality; consequently, sociologists must learn to employ multiple methods in the analysis of the same empirical events

Denzin 1970:30

Detailed examination of three critical incidents was undertaken essentially for the purpose of validating the key general findings from the semi-structured interview process and focus group discussions and probing emergent themes in greater depth. They provided perspectives on Unison organising at the local, regional and national levels. The examination of the recently privatised public service (critical incident one) was undertaken through one of the focus group discussions arranged around a meeting of the representative committee. A request was made to the committee for this purpose which was readily agreed.

The critical incidents explained how Unison's industrial work was hindered not helped by its organising strategy, how managers attempted to introduce micro management of FTO's and how a national recruitment campaign undermined the idea of building active in contrast with passive union membership. Critical incidents can be defined as:

Distinct occurrences or events which involve two or more people; they are neither inherently negative nor positive, they are merely distinct occurrences or events which require some attention, action or explanation; they are situations for which there is a need to attach meaning

Fitzgerald, 2000:190

The incidents used here fit the criteria identified by Flanagan in being complete, recent and having clear consequences (Flanagan 1954). It is quite possible for interviewees to give accounts of their own actions and beliefs and those of others only for those accounts to be undermined by their behaviour in practical and observable events. Chell (1998:68) has argued that under such a research methodology:

The linkages between context, strategy and outcomes are more readily teased out because the technique is focused on the event which is explicated in relation to what happened, why it happened, how it was handled and what the consequences were

Thus the critical incidents contributed to the triangulation process.

The data collected showed how regional priorities were not matched to workplace requirements for union support across Unison. This was reinforced in the second critical incident, the 'operation workplace' initiative by regional management requiring FTO'S to prioritise the organising of three workplace meetings a day for the purpose of listening to members, conflicting with both requirements for support from branches and national union priorities. The data was collated through observation and participation in team meetings, discussion with staff affected and through notes of reactions of lay representatives to this attempted imposition.

The third critical incident, the national recruitment campaign, emphasised union membership as an insurance service 'cover at work', was undermining an organising approach which encouraged active not passive membership. Conversely, it was itself undermined, by the emphasis on recruitment in Unison's organising strategy at the expense of representational work. Similar to the second critical incident, data was collated through participant observation and record of views from lay representatives and staff.

The practices of participant observation and annotation of field notes were used to supplement the research work and complement the evidence collated during the interviews and focus groups. The relevance of examination of internal communications has long been recognised, with Webb and Webb (1894: xxvi) identifying the significance of such method to sociological research "The use of the document in sociology possesses a method of investigation which compensates for the inability to use the method of deliberate experiment". Furthermore: "Sociology, like all other sciences, can advance only upon the basis of a precise observation of actual facts" (ibid: xix).

This methodology contributes robustness to the research findings by addressing the problem of interviews constructing the social reality of organising work as opposed to revealing that reality. Placing the interviews within a framework of observational research and analysis of documentation, together with ongoing reflective awareness, provides for critical engagement and legitimate, credible explanation.

Consideration of quantitative methods in the research plan acknowledged that research methods based on questionnaires and social surveys have three crucial characteristics: they implicitly provide a wide coverage of participant points of view, at a specific time, and assert the importance of empirical research (see Denscombe 2010:11). Given that surveys are useful for obtaining factual information from people this method was considered. However surveys are more relevant to obtaining mass data from a large number of people on a specific issue. In this case researching sensitive and complicated issues around organisational strategy and its relation to key staff in a highly contentious area required detailed evidence and insight based on the experience and motivations of union staff and workplace activists. Given the importance of placing trade union organising strategy within a framework of sociological theory and that survey outcomes tend to focus on the data based on a 'speaks for itself' approach, the latter was considered inappropriate without the contextual framework provided by sociological theory identified in chapter three.

Why Unison and 'A' Region?

Unison is the self-contained identity chosen for the research case study focusing on organising work and the implications which emerge from that work for Unison FTOs. A detailed inquiry which the case study provides for can uncover issues and reveal knowledge not provided from other more restricted types of inquiry. Since its formation in 1993 Unison has placed importance on the development of national strategies for building the organisation. Given its position Unison experience has implications for general prospects for union renewal.

When US organising based on the 'organising model' was introduced into the UK Unison was the largest UK trade union, dominated by structures which were formed

for supporting national collective bargaining arrangements and was arguably the first UK trade union to adopt and embrace managerial approaches to staff, including FTOs, and achieving stated national objectives through a national recruitment plan (Unison 1995). Given the development of new public management and the reconfigured delivery of public services emerging from neoliberal ideology, Unison, as the main public service union, presents an ideal vehicle for exploring the internal conflicts inherent within trade unions. Furthermore, Unison enthusiastically embraced the organising agenda (Waddington and Kerr 2000, 2009) and has been influenced by the SEIU whose success in responding to new public management forms is referenced earlier in the cases of care workers and janitors. It is also a typical trade union in that it is a general union with a declining membership base making it appropriate for issues of theoretical generalisability. Although the examples of success quoted in support of the SEIU organising initiatives are significantly based on occupational groups, the targeting of which Unison has not undertaken to any significant degree.

Unison is the largest public sector trade union in the UK with a membership of 1,277,750 as of December 2013 (TUC 2014). It follows that given its size what Unison does and how it sees its role is of some significance for the future of UK trade unions. The increasingly deep-seated problems of inequality in the UK and continuing policies of austerity that both the government and opposition party's support make Unison's position, as both a representative of public sector workers and a champion of public services, crucial. It is also of interest as a body for research given historic doubts expressed around the ability of general unions to represent workers from across industry, occupation or sectors within the broader economy (see Chapter One). Trade union growth has also been connected to periods of worker militancy (Cronin 1984) and not any specific national organising or recruitment strategy, placing the importance of Unison's strategies into relief.

'A' Region was selected as the focus of the research for several reasons. At the time the research commenced it was a region of Unison with a reputation for being innovative often being the focus for trial exercises in the introduction of new systems

for staffing. It was also the most successful region for recruitment to Unison, a position it had often held. Given the relationship and emphasis placed on recruitment within union organising strategies it was a region of particular importance given it throws the aforementioned tensions around bureaucracy into sharp relief. If organising was failing to renew Unison in this region - or conversely the research was confirming its apparent successes - then either way it would be of some value to examine its approach to organising work. It was also a region which presented itself as at the forefront of organising work more generally. Indeed shortly after collation of the primary data the region had linked up with a national community organising initiative for purposes of trialling organising techniques originating from work in the communities of Chicago USA. Although not a focus here such initiatives in themselves require attention as to how such approaches impact on union organising approaches and the implications for staffing. The initiatives also confirm the commitment of the Regional Management Team to innovation and open mindedness in approaches to building union organisation.

Operationalisation

The primary research involving interviews and focus groups was undertaken over an eighteen month period from October 2011 to March 2013. To reiterate, 'A' Region was chosen as at the time of planning the research was known for an innovative approach to organising work and was the highest recruiting region within Unison. Given the emergent issue of definitions of organising and recruitment becoming synonymous the Region was appropriate for examination. The original intention was to limit the research to the Unison FTO, the Regional Organiser (RO), formerly Regional Officer and Regional Managers within 'A' Region. However it became apparent that the strategy of Meeting the Organising Challenge (see Chapter Five) had increasing relevance and, given the emergent managerial responsibilities of the RO, Area Organisers and Local Organisers were also interviewed. In addition a number of experienced administrative staff, a much neglected group of trade union staff for research purposes, were interviewed having volunteered following a presentation made at an 'A' Region staff conference. Permission was obtained from the Regional Secretary for both the

presentation proceeding and the time for staff to volunteer to be interviewed for the research. The emphasis on volunteering was an important ethical consideration (see below).

The presentation was an introduction to the research work which was titled 'In defence of the full time union official'. The title was deliberately provocative in order to attract interest and I believe tapped into some of the concerns of Unison staff over the changes to staffing structures. The presentation introduced issues of sociological theory, the position of the FTO, potential sources of internal and external conflict and current debates around organising strategy. After a question and answer session a form was circulated to staff present to enter their details if they were prepared to be interviewed for the research and agreement was reached with twenty three staff at that time. In addition, seven staff including three ROs who were unable to attend the aforementioned staff conference, volunteered to become research participants on becoming aware of the work through receipt of the staff conference agenda. Staff were forewarned of the potential time commitment and that permission had been provided for attendance at interviews.

In commencing interviews it was apparent that inconsistency in understanding of Unison's organising strategy was prevalent. Furthermore, expectations around the role of the Unison RO, what was understood by the term organising and criticism of other constituent parts of the union, most notably branches and head office, were common. Consequently in order to obtain a comprehensive collation of data other constituent parts of the union were included in the primary research. Nationally interviews with lead officials past and present who had responsibility for developing Unison's organising strategy were sought and readily granted: thus confirming the understanding of Unison being an organisation open to internal inquiry and examination. In relation to branch activists I originally sought to interview a number of activists in depth. However arranging these interviews proved problematic with a number of cancellations. Separate interviews with three branch activists who gave valuable insight into their work were undertaken. However in order to gain a more

complete insight from the Unison branch perspective access to activists was obtained through Unison steward's Employment Relations Act reaccreditation training on the premise of discussing Unison organising work as a contribution to a research project. Respective tutors of courses kindly agreed to two hour round table discussion subject to the agreement of course participants. This was also duly given with the session having some relevance and indeed complementing at least some of the subject matter within the respective training course.

An emergent key issue related to the relevance of Unison national organising strategies. Whilst this may have more resonance at a local level, a focus group discussion with a national lay representative committee was also arranged. The function which the committee represented had experienced TUPE transfer to the private sector, subsequent restructuring and redundancy and the gaining of union recognition at new sites for the service in question (see Chapter Seven). These issues had emerged concurrently with Unison's proclamations of being an organising union. The views of the national lay committee in question was therefore highly relevant to assessing this claim, the relevance of national strategy in a national dimension and how the RO role complemented the work of the lay committee.

All semi structured interviews and focus group discussions were recorded. The interviewees were from a cross section expressing views and opinions which were from their own experience and formation of ideas. Given my own lengthy experience of holding interviews, meetings and group discussions with union members, as individuals and in groups, the use of open and supplementary closed questioning was utilised in conducting the primary research covering the essential phases of the interviewers work.

The interviews commenced with some open, general questions around interviewees own trade union experience and views on the current difficulties faced by Unison. This was to set people at ease and to give some reassurance as to the subject matter. Specific questions in relation to roles and responsibilities of ROs, Unison's organising strategy and relevance of the 'Organising Model' followed. Questions were then asked

about how the different components of the union, region, branches and the National Office fitted together leading to a broader question on the relevance of Unison structure. Relations with employers, union education, political relations and views of future prospects were then sought from the interviewees.

Most ROs, other staff and lay activists, were more than ready to contribute and welcomed the opportunity the research presented for expression of their opinions and beliefs on their role and the deliberations of Unison. A small minority were more guarded, at least initially in the interview process. Indeed a number expressed some concern about giving their opinion in case of later identification: a level of paranoia which can be common when dealing with trade union officials and gave rise to an important ethical consideration (see below). Whilst the aforementioned caution was evident, once the process of interview or focus group discussion gathered momentum trade union people, whether staff or lay activists, commonly exhibited a passion about their work and the importance of trade unions for workers. Reflecting on their experience two staff did seek reassurances around anonymity post interview prompted by their previous willingness to speak freely on matters of controversy given the production of criticism of senior management, union direction and general leadership.

Respondents commonly expressed at the conclusion of the interviews how cathartic the process had been: staff and lay representatives welcomed, and indeed enjoyed the opportunity to voice their opinion on day to day matters and broader union strategy. The prevalent view was that room for such discussion within Unison is limited and constructive criticism of the union leadership not welcomed. Concern for future career prospects was perceived by some, although not all staff, as having relevance. The lay activist contribution was given freely regardless of political position and with enthusiasm for Unison tempered by criticism and frustration at how policy and strategy emerge.

Data Analysis

Compiling the data from interviews and focus groups was an ongoing iterative process in contrast to a single piece of work. The analysis was based on an inductive process of taking the particular data and applying that data to more general and abstract statements regarding union organiser relations and strategies. Of course it is acknowledged that given my own position, referred to later in the chapter, the researcher centred principle was of particular relevance (see Denscombe 2010:273).

When interviewee and focus group discussions were completed transcription of the data collated was undertaken. The interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in such a way as to ensure a consistency in approach acknowledging that thought processes and discussion inevitably veered off into other areas which in some instances were not always relevant to the research. Nevertheless the participants contributed consistent and credible analyses of how they interpret their own reality of union work. Furthermore, the participants were able to respond to the questions posed in their own volition given the questions were open ended designed to elicit liberal response. Once transcription was completed a master document containing all the data from the primary research work was constructed. The data was backed up and catalogued and indexed based on sequence of interview and position of the participant within Unison.

Once all interviews and discussions were typed the process of anonymising contributors and reordering data from individual sessions into structure based on topic coding identified by the interview questions was undertaken. Whilst this was a laborious process to undertake, it was one which enabled the development of a heightened awareness and familiarity of the data to be considered. For this scale of research computer aided systems such as Nvivo (see Bazeley 2007) were seen as impracticable and more time consuming. The topic coding was undertaken as suggested by Morse and Richards (2002:112):

You will need to gather material by topic if you wish to reflect on all the different ways people discuss particular topics, to seek patterns in their responses, or to develop dimensions of that experience

This grouping then enabled a further analytic level of coding through the expressed similar and differing views, opinions and evidence enabling a process of contrast and comparison to be undertaken. A number of quotes used for both illustrative and representative meaning were then incorporated into the body of the chapters which present the general findings. Three main themes emerged which form the basis of the findings - the relevance of national organising strategies at the workplace, the increasing attempts at assertion of managerial prerogative both in relation to Unison staff, specifically ROs, and lay branch officers and finally the emergence of what has previously been identified as a false dichotomy of servicing and organising. On this latter point the identification of different orientations among ROs with the traditional associated with the former and the emerging prototypical RO with the latter. This in itself provided further coding of responses orientating to institutional priorities or in contrast workplace membership demands. It also allowed the research to ‘. . . appreciate the interpretations of their informants and to analyse the social contexts, constraints, and resources in which these informants act’ (Smith and Elger 2014:111).

Ethical Position

As an employee of Unison and also an RO I was conscious that my position would present both significant advantage and potential disadvantage when carrying out the research. White warns that, “whilst it is impossible for a researcher to have no impact at all on the course of a research project, it is important to be vigilant against the influence of your beliefs and preferences on the research process” (White 2009:5). As an employee of Unison this vigilance is of greater importance given the potential risk of obtaining opinions and views which could be used merely to reinforce my own relating to Unison’s approach to organising. This led me to seek out with greater urgency evidence which would challenge and provide strong argument of a counter position.

Given this reality it was necessary to ensure that a balance was observed in identifying data and drawing conclusions. Importantly the process of volunteering, as opposed to identification of potential participants, contributed to a sense of balance free from solicitation on the researcher's part. Although, given the ontological position adopted, it is acknowledged that 'Critical realists usually assume that complete detachment from their research subjects is impossible' (Ackroyd and Karlsson *op cit*:27). Brook and Darlington (2013: 233) go further by advocating an 'organic public sociology of work in which the researcher is overtly partisan and active on the side of the marginalized and labour', a position made more complicated when working on internal trade union relations.

Nevertheless the advantages of research from an internal perspective enabled a part auto-ethnographic approach producing a layered account which placed my own experiences with data collected from staff and activists, abstract analysis and relevant literature (see Ellis *et al.* 2011). As Charmaz (1983) observes such an approach enables data collection and analysis to proceed simultaneously. Importantly it connects the 'micro' with the 'meta' as the everyday life of the union FTO is linked to the broader political and strategic organisational agendas and practices. As Boyle and Parry (2007: 186) contend this helps to 'unearth and illuminate the tacit and subaltern aspects of relationships'. This approach adds to the credibility, validity and legitimacy of the research.

Given the nature of the research there was a need to ensure no potential harm to participants. This objective was helped by having no line management or other authority over the members and officials interviewed. Nevertheless the question of confidentiality was paramount. This inevitably presented a challenge of gaining trust and confidence of participants. Trade unions from my own experience can be riddled with internal conflict and competition (see Carter 1991). Since working for Unison avoidance of identification with camps or partisanship to a political faction or party no doubt helped. This stance has been easier to achieve given there appears to be little evidence of factionalism within the employed ranks.

This is in contrast with MSF where there existed FTO camps based around 'MSF for Labour' and 'Unity Left' (see Carter *ibid*). In Unison I am not aware of any such similar unofficial groupings among the cadre of FTOs. That is not to say there remain no sensitivities given the questions covered and the questioning of senior management strategy. However all staff interviewed accepted the assurance that the interviews were being conducted under the ethics guide of the British Sociological Association and on that basis were felt able to contribute. For lay activists, whilst not employed, increasingly there are attempts to manage their role from the Region and that has brought some conflict between activists and staff. A constant state of reflection in carrying out and analysing the research was important given social researchers are not neutral observers more so in this case given my position within Unison as an FTO.

Chapter Five: Unison

Introduction

As indicated in Chapter Two, organising, as opposed to servicing, advocated as the solution to the crisis of western trade unionism, has flattered to deceive. Chapter Three turned to an examination of the nature of trade unions as institutions in order to question whether the explanation for the inability of unions to radically change lie in structural constraints and, in particular, the social relations that constitute a bureaucracy. This chapter attempts to utilise the insights from these earlier chapters in turning to the union that is the focus of the study, Unison. The chapter therefore begins a process of examination of the motivations for its formation and how Unison and its mode of operation has been conceptualised. The description of the national structure and policies developed by the union and how they affect the role and function of FTOs provide an essential background for the more focused and empirical study of a Unison region that follows.

Unison came into being in 1993 following the decision of three public sector unions to merge, forming a so-called 'super union' for public sector workers (Willman and Cave 1994). The new union brought together in membership workers from different occupations and backgrounds. Their common bond was that of working in public services: those services increasingly experiencing the consequences of neo liberalism. Their constituencies were described by McIlroy (1995:14):

NALGO was an all grades union for white collar staff in local government but also recruited in the health service, gas, electricity, water, transport and higher education. The National Union of Public Employees was NALGO'S opposite number while the Confederation of Health Service Employees had aspired to be an industrial union for the NHS

NUPE's membership was largely blue collar workers in workplaces also recognising NALGO, while COHSE was spectacularly unsuccessful in its aspiration to be an industrial union. Following merger it has been claimed that Unison was not just a new union, the size of which alone gave it significance, but was also radically different both in its formation and characteristics from its predecessors

and other trade unions (Terry 2000:2). Its size and the claim to be different has stimulated much academic interest and, as Terry (2000:2) reminds us, Unison 'has been more studied and dissected than any other trade union'.

The rationale for Unison

NALGO, NUPE and COHSE had, to a degree, common motivations for merging. Most UK trade unions had experienced unprecedented losses in membership, influence and power due to multi-causal reasons. These included macroeconomics, changing workforce composition, management resistance to unionisation and state policy antithetical to trade unions (Mason and Bain 1993). In the public sector, where union membership remained relatively stable, the threats posed by neo-liberalism through the continuing electoral success of the Conservative Party were having some effect (see Terry 2000). According to Carter and Fairbrother (1999:10):

A growing feeling that the public sector unions were unable to meet the challenges of a hostile government, new structures and a changed climate within local government was the principal reason for the creation of Unison

Privatisations and competitive tendering of public services had exposed structural weakness in unions geared to national bargaining. Failures in strategic responses and uneven levels of union organisation had contributed to loss of membership and union recognition (see Foster and Scott 1997). These factors impacted, if unevenly, on local government and health, areas where the constituent unions of Unison had an important presence. Membership fragmentation and increasing local bargaining with a plurality of employers, many operating beyond the boundaries of the traditional public sector, presented significant organisational challenges for unions. The entry of private sector employers into the provision of public services questioned the rationale of union structures based on branches formed around large public sector employers. According to Waddington and Kerr (2000) in local government union density fell from 78% of the workforce in 1979 to 46% by 1995.

There were also specific motivations for each constituent union entering into merger. Primarily affecting ancillary services in local government and the NHS, the competitive tendering process requirement had a demonstrative impact on NUPE. Between 1980 and 1992 NUPE lost 25% of its membership, 70% of which came after 1988 when competitive tendering legislation was enacted (Colling 1995).

For NALGO, the largest of the merger participants; the prime motivation for merger according to Undy (1999) was consolidation of a position that was relatively secure. However whilst NALGO had continued to increase membership despite the “scoundrel times of Thatcher’s anti-union 1980s” (Fryer 2000:25), the emergence of new forms of public management influenced the politics of collective bargaining and arguably was principal in NALGO entering into negotiations with NUPE, and later COHSE on union merger (Waddington 1995).

COHSE, like NUPE, had also suffered some loss of membership in the preceding years. Its main competitor for recruitment of registered nursing staff within the NHS, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), had been favoured by government policy throughout the 1980s. The attraction of strength in numbers in a public sector union with greater resources to meet those challenges was a prime motivation for COHSE’s interest in merger (Fryer 2000). COHSE and NUPE were rivals in the NHS and coming together would end the luxury of inter union competition and provide a more influential voice for NHS members in what is a highly political, if not politicised, service.

Given the organisational problems stemming from competitive tendering, faced primarily by NUPE, deliberations around merger offered the new union an opportunity to develop a structure to address these challenges. By the time of merger and shortly after, with the later election of a New Labour government, the expanding threat under the banner of new public management, with privatisation and service outsourcing was joined by a plethora of private sector

management techniques including the introduction of performance targets in public services (see Mooney and Law 2007, Whitfield 2001, 2006). The consequence of which, Waddington and Kerr (2009) confirmed, was that “45.4 per cent of Unison branches now deal with more than ten employers, of which seventeen per cent had fifty one or more employers”. As was argued by Fairbrother (1989, 1996, 2002), these changes presented potential opportunity for new trade union forms, more workplace focused, to emerge. With the devolution from national FTO dominated bargaining structures, which threatened existing union organisation (see Foster and Scott 1997), to local ones centred on issues emanating from their workplaces, the opportunity for greater involvement of union rank and file members was evident, as was the potential from adoption of the ‘organising model’.

The formation of Unison presented an opportunity to establish structures which could address these consequences for existing union organisation, seeking to turn the threats posed from new public management into opportunities for building and strengthening workplace union organisation. In addition the fragmentation of services and the introduction of profit motivation saw the additional opportunity for the new union to emphasise a role as the champions of public service. Concentrating on the union role of the ‘sword of justice’ as opposed to that of a ‘vested interest’ (Flanders 1970), Unison could position itself as the defender of quality public services and agents of change and innovation (see Foster and Scott 1997, Terry 2000).

Certainly the early proclamations of purpose for the new union were consistent with this agenda:

It will provide a wide range of services and support to its members: it will encourage participation; it will be governed and controlled by its lay members; it will be based at partnership at all levels . . . it will influence public debate on the provision of services to the public both in this country and internationally

NUPE 1991

However the new union, despite academic involvement and of some significance beyond internal structures, the management school at Cranfield University, failed to address these key issues during the merger negotiations (see Terry 2000, Dempsey 2000). Within a short period Unison, according to Fairbrother *et al.* (1996:5) continued to organise ‘... as if these structural changes have not taken place’. At least part of the explanation for this rested in the different problems faced by the different constituencies within Unison. For NALGO the need for radical restructuring and the shifting of resources and focus from the centre to the local was limited given its position at the time of merger. Moreover, NALGO and NUPE differed in significant ways, with NALGO characterised as ‘member led’ and NUPE ‘officer led’. These differences were less important, however, than the strong central leaderships and powerful national executives that may have been reluctant to erode their own positions (Terry 2000): a significant factor in consideration of attempts at union transformation post-merger.

Consequently, questions of rebalancing resources of the new union from the centre to branches would always be difficult given vested interests, and, without any urgency for NALGO, was to remain one of a number of unresolved issues at the time of merger (Fryer 2000). In addition, whilst there was an increasing need for a union focus on the local, rather than national bargaining structures, fragmentation of services ‘entails a degree of centralisation of power within individual unions if resources are to be conserved, mobilised and targeted on priority issues’ (Kelly and Heery 1994:204). The Unison merger experience and subsequent union form confirmed that internal interests and differing concerns can override the importance of bargaining structures, despite their importance for union relevance.

Unison more than a new union

At the time of merger the new union claimed 1,486,984 members according to the Trade Union Certification Officer reports (quoted in McIlroy 1995:15); although later

membership reports of the new union suggest these figures were somewhat inflated. The merger was intended to be more than just conserving numbers. Terry (2000:2) asserts that whilst trade union mergers can sometimes be likened to “no more than the temporary relief, the sort a sick person gets from turning over in bed” the Unison merger was not solely a response to falling membership. What the founders aimed to achieve was to “stabilise and build on its public service base in the first instance” (Terry 2000:3). More broadly the new union’s aims and values were enshrined in its rule book and included commitments to improve pay and conditions, ensure equality of treatment, fair representation and guaranteed minimum standards of service including workplace advice and representation (Wheeler 2000:70).

Four key union functions and purposes for Unison were subsequently identified as negotiating, recruiting, representing and, as part of the same function, organising and servicing members (Wheeler 2000). This latter point is significant given it suggests that organisation and servicing are intertwined, a view to be refuted in subsequent approaches to organising. The objectives and principles would not be limited to terms and conditions of employment but wider campaigning, suggesting emphasis on the ‘sword of justice’ face of trade unions. Unison was to be an outward looking union with a myriad of opportunities for participation in an exceptional internal democracy (Bickerstaffe 2000). Opportunity for membership participation was not just through traditional branch structures, but in service and self-organised groups, underpinned by principles of fair representation and proportionality which ensures that the policy conferences reflect the gender composition of the membership (Unison rule book 2014). The self-organised groups originated from NALGO and were seen as the institutionalization of identity politics, in part as a response to historic discrimination of minority groups within official trade union structures (Humphrey 2000).

The involvement of Cranfield University School of Management continued post-merger in supporting the new management structure within Unison. ‘Seven critical success factors’ were identified:

1. Improving (managerial) communications within the union;
2. Improving the motivation of all staff;
3. Improving administrative coherence;
4. Recognising the changing role of lay members;
5. Making a reality of equal treatment, particularly for women;
6. Developing the campaigning role, particularly within 'community coalitions';
7. Delivering quality individual services.

Dempsey 2000:60

These factors were less about developing collective identity, raising levels of membership involvement and stimulating activity but primarily about the internal operation of the union - with the exception of the aspiration to link with community coalitions on campaigning issues. The consequence for organising and strategy will be discussed in the following chapters but strengthening management communication and responsibility, whilst providing for increased control and direction of staff to focus on national union objectives, served to limit both the traditional autonomy of full time officers and the organising objectives themselves. The Senior Management Team (SMT) supported at regional level by the Regional Management Team (RMT) had responsibility for delivery of strategy.

The management of staff was seen as crucial to the success of the new union and systems and programmes became integral to the day to day operation of Unison (see Dempsey 2000, Wheeler 2000). Dempsey claims that "during and since its creation UNISON has worked to develop an understanding of the need for skilled and sensitive management" (Dempsey 2000:58). The introduction of training programmes, initially for Unison's SMT, but extended to over 100 other National and Senior Regional Officers, the development of job descriptions for all staff and encouragement for training opportunities in staff development were significant responses to the challenge of becoming a good employer (Dempsey 2000). The introduction of regular team

meetings, one to one meetings and personal development reviews would, it was claimed, take staff development and support to a new level (Wheeler 2000:73). Furthermore, there was anticipation that the adoption of an open policy on recruitment of staff would bring fresh and radical ideas to the union, a policy which followed that of the SEIU and other US unions already committed to organising. In pursuing such policy there was no recognition of the potential problems which would arise from the loss of industrial relations experience, the consequences of which are explored in Chapter Eight. Importance was placed on the achievement of Investors in People (IiP) accreditation that, together with the emphasis on developing women trade unionists, would combine to develop a new culture going beyond staff and into Unison's structure.

Unison structure and analysis

Unison members are placed in branches established in accordance with union rules normally based around a single employer e.g. County and District Councils, privatised utilities, Universities and NHS Trusts. The Unison branch is required to establish a branch committee which consists of Branch Officers (Branch Secretary, Chair, Treasurer, etc.) and should also be minded of the rule to promote opportunities for specific groups of members through self-organised groups i.e. women members, black members, disabled members and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members also young and retired members. Such groups have rights to representation on the branch committee. The Unison branch is located within a Regional structure of organisation of which the Regional Council is the key policy making body. The Regional Council consisting of branch delegates forms a Regional Committee establishing several sub committees to consider and input into specific areas of union work e.g. Welfare, International, and Equalities etc. The main service groups such as Health, Higher Education and Local Government also have service group structures at Regional and National level and hold annual service group conferences. The senior lay officers within the Region are involved in consultation on regional organising strategy and through the Membership, Organising, Recruitment and Education (MORE) committee

determine the recognition of good branch organising work through the annual regional awards night (see Chapter Seven).

Self-organised groups also have a separate structure within Unison at local, regional and national levels. They have a right to send delegates to national conference, regional council and its sub committees and national self - organised groups. Through traditional structures, self-organisation and rules of proportionality Unison presents itself as a union with robust democratic processes for lay control and officer accountability. However the structure may also provide for an inwardly focused committee based activism which extends bureaucratic processes into an embedded cultural form. Whilst claiming to be outward looking, Unison structure presented a potential for a focus on internal activism and all that entailed, with the opportunity for activists to attend as delegates to the various councils, committees and self-organised groups without restriction (UNISON 2014). An illustration of Unisons structure is set out overleaf in figure 5.1. The NEC has responsibility for the general management, prioritisation of, and execution of policy. It comprises elected representatives from regions, service groups and has reserved seats for four black members and a young member. The NEC has a number of standing sub committees with specific responsibility for policy areas and limited overview of staffing. The national delegate conference is the supreme body of authority and meets for four days annually. Its purpose is to develop policy, maintain the rules of the union and hold the executive to account (see Unison rule book 2014). In addition annual conferences are held specifically for women and self-organised groups. The structure encourages participation within Unison and branches are assessed on their compliance as part of a joint assessment (JABO) process (see Chapter Seven). The ability to adapt and change in order to confront the processes of decentralization of management decision making through public service outsourcing is absent.

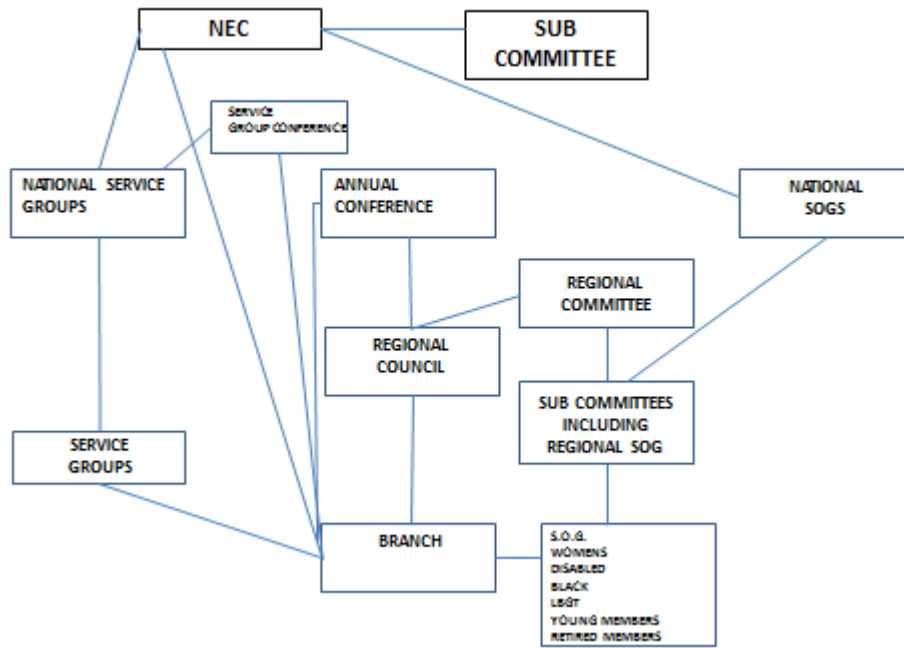


Figure 5.1

The merger into Unison saw the domination of lay structures by former NALGO white collar activists which marginalised former NUPE blue collar members (Bennett and Haunch 2001). Whilst manual workers were hit hardest by contracting out, their voice was marginalised within the new union (Colling and Claydon 2000). This domination of those more used to speaking was encapsulated in a quotation from a manual worker regarding proportionality 'I don't know about weighted voting, I think that they should have weighted fucking speaking' (cited in Bennett and Haunch 2001:3). Furthermore the ensuing need to follow members into the private sector was also inhibited through the indifference of representatives who remained employed in the public sector (Bach and Givan 2008). Assessment of the relevance of Unison's structures for the industrial challenges it faced would suggest that the merger outcome fell short of expectations of addressing the changing world of public services and commencing a process of renewal that gave voice to all workers.

Identity politics were broadened through the advance of discrimination laws which extended protected characteristics and additionally through the establishment of young and retired members groups. However issues of proportionality and

representation failed to address the question of uneven experiences of white and blue collar workers access to the union's organisation. As Hyman noted:

It is essential to co-ordinate activity; to avoid divisive demands and strategies; to relate particular interests to broader class interests; to show special consideration for those . . . whose oppression by capital is matched by subordination within trade unionism itself

Hyman 1989 quoted in Colling and Claydon 2000:95

Such marginalisation of a significant membership constituency acutely affected by forms of new public management limits the consideration of broader union organising strategies to everyday workplace experience. This position may partly explain the disconnection between national organising strategies and local experiences identified in subsequent chapters. It did, however, have one immediate consequence:

Senior officers argued that manual workers were leaving Unison and electing to join one of the general unions, particularly where white collar ex-NALGO branches dominated manual workers organisations in post-merger structures

Waddington and Kerr 1999:152

Early into the merger Foster and Scott (1997) identified problems of structural disengagement between the functions of national and local levels within Unison. Analysis of the new union suggests a structural compromise based on competing interests and position as opposed to any industrial logic:

. . . the outcome was a negotiated compromise, whereby the concerns of the three unions were incorporated in different ways. In practice, UNISON retained much of the ethos informing NALGO during the 1980s and 1990s. Underpinning this approach was the principle of representativeness (known as proportionality). This principle was predicated on the proposition that union members are differentiated and that recognition of this is central to the union's future. This was complemented by an equally important principle that of participative and relatively autonomous branches, supported but not controlled by full-time officials

Carter and Fairbrother 1999:11

The compromise of accommodating competing internal interests together with the inward focus of structural deliberations suggests considerable problems and obstacles for strategies aimed at union transformation.

Organising strategy and full time officers

Following merger the new union was faced with serious organisational challenges due to emergent financial difficulties. These challenges included increasing expenditure on legal costs as unions reverted to legal procedures, including the European Courts, to challenge decisions of government on transfers of undertakings, minimum standards at work and fighting large scale equal pay claims (Colling and Claydon 2000). The introduction of new rates of union subscription linked to earnings combined with the aforementioned atrophy of blue collar members impacted on income. The response included a reduction in staffing, including FTOs; from 1800 to 1200 with 400 jobs going in the first year post-merger (Waddington and Kerr 2000). Subsequent pressure on organisational support for members was to be met through the delegation of representative responsibilities from ROs to lay representatives, predating the adoption of the organising associated with the TUC's 'new unionism' that promoted a similar shift in responsibilities. The requirement for well-resourced central structures, capable of coordinating activity, responses and initiatives was evident but that resources were also needed to address the reality that 'relatively weak local organisation has been exposed by the decentralisation of managerial authority' (Colling and Claydon 2000:83).

A crucial link between the national and local levels was played by Regional Officers. As Colling and Claydon noted:

If public service unionism is to remain distinctive and appropriate to the context in which its members work, a greater degree of cohesion is required . . . Regional full time officers play an important part in achieving that

Colling and Claydon 2000:98

The importance of FTOs and the weakness of local organisation cannot be overestimated. Surveys of Unison members found widespread dissatisfaction with

local union organisation, itself under pressure due to difficulties in recruiting workplace union representatives, obtaining time off for those who are recruited and reduced support of full time officers. In the latter case given their workloads had increased with a combination of staffing reduction and increases in the number of employers recognising Unison (Waddington and Kerr 1999). It was also the case that initial organising strategies in Unison were in reality focused on recruiting members into poorly organised workplaces rather than building union organisation (Waddington and Kerr *ibid*).

Chapter Two illustrated the distinction between servicing and organising models of trade unions and how they orientate to working in ways which either encourage or discourage member participation in addressing workplace issues and grievances. Whilst Winning the Organised Workplace or WOW courses (see below) recognised and encouraged issue based organising, confusingly at its inception it was claimed that Unison had adopted both elements of servicing and organising models:

From the outset Unison adopted elements of both the organising and servicing models, although it should be acknowledged that no explicit reference was made to the two approaches at the time

Waddington and Kerr 2000:235

Waddington and Kerr (the latter at the time of writing a senior official influential in the development of national strategy) later confirmed that, “the 1995 Unison National Recruitment Plan (NRP) was a ‘traditional’ recruitment initiative in that it predated the introduction of organising techniques in Britain” (Waddington and Kerr 2009:31).

Encouraging member participation, branch autonomy and with FTO roles to support and not control branches, an orientation to organising was not necessarily hostile to Unison’s developing culture. However, the definition of organising was understood, not as radically different ways of dealing with workplace issues, but simply, as it was in the case of MSF (see Chapter Two), in terms of the same practices carried out at different representation levels:

... 'support if I have a problem at work' is the prime reason that underpins the unionism of most members. There is no evidence ... that members have a preference for support from full time officers, as is the objective of the servicing model, or from lay representatives, as intended by the organising model

Waddington and Kerr 2000:256

Further confusion was generated by the misunderstanding that the servicing model is restricted to 'the provision of financial services' (Waddington and Kerr 2000:249). This lack of clarity has implications for the role of FTOs and the nature and objectives of organising strategy. In addition the terms recruitment and organising have been interchangeable and generally have come to refer to recruitment activity.

The announcement in 1995 of the National Recruitment Plan (NRP) targeting a membership increase from 1.2 million to 1.5 million members by 2000 was followed in 1996 with the commencement of a strategic review within Unison (Unison 1997) which found the organisation to be centralist, bureaucratic and perversely too reliant on the servicing of members by stewards. This latter point is at odds with the expressed objective of delegating representational work to branches and suggests a view abroad that servicing should not be undertaken at any level.

Unison structures may promote an inward looking activist cadre exacerbating tendencies to a lay bureaucracy given "many self-organised groups have tended to focus their activities on regional and national level activities rather than those at workplace or branch level" (Waddington and Kerr 2009:43). Such structural features may detract from Unison's ability to recruit workplace representatives if members interested in trade union activism are directed to internal structures which may inhibit opportunity for workplace organising and representational functions. Rather than address problems of capacity in regional support for branches, the strategic review recommended devolving finances from the centre to branches. In doing so each branch was required to establish branch development plans in partnership with the RO (Unison undated), encourage in-fill recruitment and introduce activist training around organising (Unison 1996). The NRP was replaced within two years by the National Organising and Recruitment Strategy (NORS) (Unison 2003).

A turn to organising

NORS emerged from a 1997 Unison paper 'building an organizing culture'. For full time officers the paper repeated the narrative that the 'Regional Organizer has to change from a servicer to an organizer, and stewards have to play a greater role in supporting members' (Unison1997). Again no evidence was provided confirming such assertions in relation to the FTO role in Unison. There were four key objectives to the NORS:

... the recruitment and retention of members; the organisation and development of networks of lay representatives within all branches; the generation of higher levels of participation in branch life and more effective representation and negotiation within branches

Waddington and Kerr 2009: 33

Despite repeated failure, a more ambitious target for increasing membership levels was announced, to 1.7million by 2007 and up to 2 million by 2010.

Unison adopted the TUC national training course, lifted directly from the AFL-CIO Organising Institute. 'Winning the Organised Workplace' ('WOW') became the key training for organising staff, primarily at that time ROs. The literature promoting the course stated 'get on a WOW course: become an effective organiser' (Unison 2001a). In the course materials an attempt at explaining what organising means includes "workers organising themselves" (Unison 2001). Further the material states that "organising is about increasing the number of activists and participating members to as high a percentage as practical" (Unison 2001).

The course included laudable statements regarding organising objectives but the reality of subsequent experience has demonstrated the difficulties of how to get to that position. The course materials were primarily a toolkit around how to map workplaces, have 1:1 meetings with workers and deal with issues in an organising as opposed to a servicing way. In parallel an associated course titled 'Unison: the Organising Challenge' was rolled out for staff in which it was claimed that 'the situation facing unions in the US and Australia was similar to which we face today in the UK' (Unison 2001b:11). Implying both direct comparison, but also that US and Australian unions had addressed their situations of crisis.

Developing the organising narrative, new and innovative training courses for lay representatives based on organising techniques were introduced. The 'Bee Active' courses for lay representatives were based on WOW courses but pointed representatives to the implementation of branch development and organising plans. Such plans were intended to provide a framework which linked organising work and techniques with constituent parts of the union. So targeting potential members may link with the work of a Unison self-organised group. Similarly workplace learning and the role of the Union Learning Representative (ULR) presented opportunities for recruitment.

To support branches in developing branch development and organisation plans (BDOP), each Unison region was to appoint five Branch Development Officers (BDOs) to work in conjunction with the RO on campaigning on local issues which were key to membership growth (Waddington and Kerr 2009). As part of the BDOP organising teams were to be established in branches whose work was to be monitored by a regional committee reporting to a national committee responsible for organising. That a national committee, through the regional committee, can overview and monitor a local branch in terms of its development in a union the size of Unison is highly improbable.

The Unison RO was seen as central to promoting and monitoring the NORS. However, despite a reducing number of Unison representatives and with less ROs post-merger, the RO was expected to refocus their role to managing of workplace activism primarily on in-fill recruitment activity encouraging a similar reorientation of lay representatives in the process. This managed activism, adopting elements of new public management primarily through centralised target setting (recruitment) and local accountability, has led to claims by Bach and Givan (2008:530) that:

Unison has reinforced its emphasis on developing local organisation within an overarching framework of priority setting and performance targets. Unison has therefore adopted a hybrid approach to renewal, strengthening its management and leadership, while reinvigorating workplace organisation

While the former claim is certainly the case, there is little evidence of reinvigorated workplace organisation. The problem of capacity to cover member's demands for representation and support in the workplace became more acute as ROs now focused on recruitment coupled with a reduced number of workplace representatives who were also expected to shift their focus to recruitment. This issue should not be underestimated given:

The demand for full time officer support was said to have grown following merger. NALGO branch organiser roles were phased out whilst 'casework and negotiating activity continued to grow apace' increasing the demand for full time officer support yet this support was in decline due to reductions in staffing budgets

Colling and Claydon 2000:85

As previously identified the reduction in FTOs is also confirmed by Waddington and Kerr (2000:243), a reduction that has occurred in a context of casework and negotiating issues that are more varied and complicated given the extension of individual employment rights coupled with the decentralisation of managerial decision making. For Unison Branch Secretaries bargaining and representation took priority over organising and membership gains were linked to the addressing of industrial issues at work such as pay disputes and campaigns against cuts (Waddington and Kerr 2009). Furthermore a number of problems have been identified which militate against building local union organisation not least of which is recruiting lay members to take on roles as workplace representatives. Limited time off arrangements, more workplaces and work intensification combined to discourage workers volunteering to do union work. This weak local organisation is confirmed in the identification of widespread dissatisfaction among Unison members with the support received from the local Unison branch (see Waddington and Kerr 1999, 2000).

A strategy of increased devolvement and reliance on branch lay representatives doing case work in these conditions seems questionable at best. Given 'members primarily join the union for support should a problem arise at work' (Waddington and Kerr 2000:240, also see Waddington 2014a) the performance of Unison in addressing those needs whether through a servicing or organising orientation should be of concern.

Eventually the WOW course was phased out as organising training was to be integral to the Unison education programme for both staff and lay representatives. This integration was part of a broader revised strategy for building union organisation by switching resources from servicing to organising. However, as identified later, the integration of organising into lay representative training courses was accompanied by the dilution of how to represent members. Nevertheless the WOW courses and the introduction of branch development plans were seen by some as the adoption of the organising model in practice and that Unison was transformed into an organising union (Waddington and Kerr 2009).

Voss and Sherman (2000) propose several key factors to suggest that a trade union can be described as an organising union. Included is evidence of commitment to organising by senior union officials, investment in and redesigning of union training courses for staff and activists and the redirection of resources towards increasing the number of staff who work in supporting organising. On this latter point increasing external recruits who are committed to organising and higher levels of member participation in organising campaigns is seen as important. The adoption of the NORS for Waddington and Kerr suggest such transformation. However further evidence of organising strategy being in reality mere recruitment campaigns is revealed in their admission that “Unison organizing campaigns are not about securing recognition from employers, but focus on in-fill recruitment” (Waddington and Kerr 2009:30).

Consequently “the ‘classic’ organising campaign based on achieving recognition is thus not central to Unison” (Waddington and Kerr 2009:31). Given that part of the rationale for the formation of Unison was in response to the outsourcing of public services, the opportunities to organise beyond traditional public service boundaries are legion and have been strategically ignored.

In reality the idea that local union representatives are able to orientate towards identifying recruitment targets as a priority is at best optimistic, at worst mistaken. In examining Unison organisation in Higher Education commitment to organising from stewards was limited due to an overload of servicing tasks (Byford 2011). Similarly, in

the NHS, the Unison organising strategy was seen as a top down process foisted on branches as additional to branch priorities which remained the issues members faced in the workplace. These workplace issues also dominated interactions between the Unison FTO and the Unison branch (De Turberville 2006). In the NHS union density had declined by 9% in the eight years following the formation of Unison (De Turberville 2006).

Whilst FTOs acknowledged the emphasis Unison placed on recruitment of new members the context in which they worked weakened their ability to prioritise appropriately as Colling and Claydon (2000:86) also point out:

Organisers were aware of the need to prioritise recruitment but methods based on their direct involvement were seen as impracticable. Partly this was a matter of limited time but large scale recruitment exercises also provided diminishing returns . . . Better organised activists monitored their own membership data, responded to lists of joiners and leavers when these were offered by employers, and circulated regular newsletters, including membership application forms. However regular time commitments and face to face recruitment was few and far between

Given the challenges and difficulties faced by Unison branches and FTOs it is unsurprising that 'fewer than half of all branches had thus developed a plan to recruit non-members seven years after the adoption of the NORS' (Waddington and Kerr 2009:40). A review of strategic objectives may have seen this reality acknowledged. However such national strategies are devised away from and uninformed by those who are tasked with implementation at the workplace. What was evident was that despite the apparent emphasis on organising, recruitment objectives were never met.

Meeting the Organising Challenge

Regional support for branches was based on a structure in which the RO was the pivotal role in branch support as illustrated in figure 5.1 overleaf:

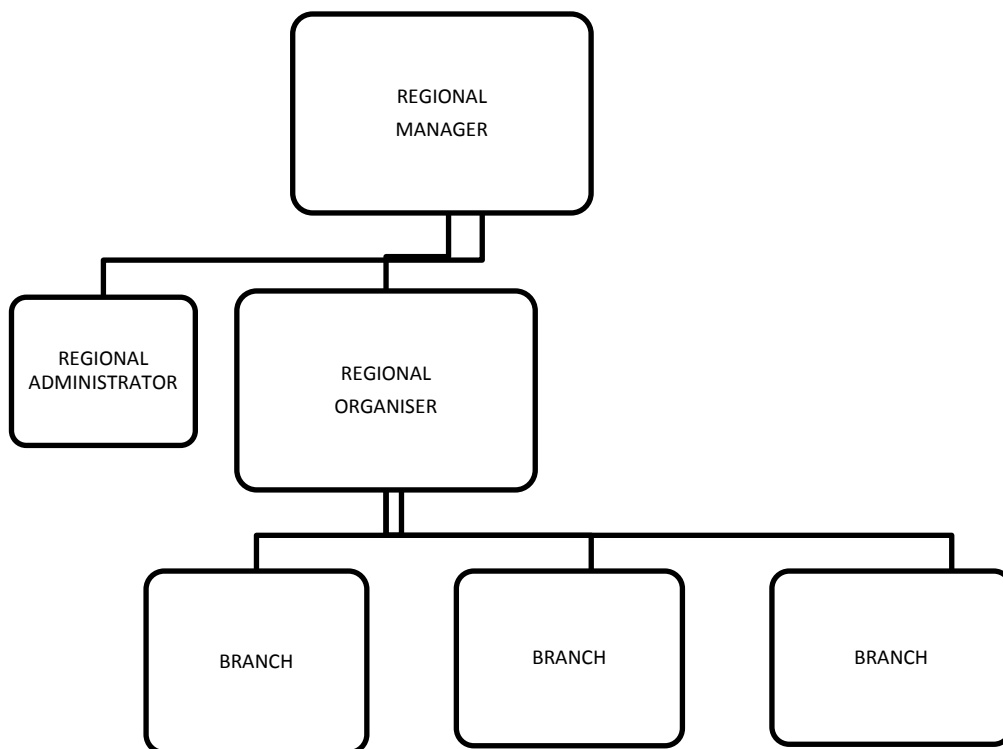


Figure 5.1

However further revision of Unison’s organising strategy led to significant changes including a potentially radical restructure of staffing. Meeting the Organising Challenge (MtOC) had two key elements; transferring Unison staff resource into organising work and simultaneously providing a career path into regional management roles (Unison 2007). The rationale for justification of the new staffing structure was that faced with increasing challenges to union organisation through globalisation and fragmentation of public services there was a need to refocus further Unison staff resources to organising work.

In addition internal documents identified five issues arising from a review of Branch and Service Group structures, the need to continue recruiting in excess of 120,000 members per annum to stand still; the changing nature, organisation and delivery of public services; the service demands from non-traditional membership sectors; continuing trends; and other trade unions responses. On this latter point the formation

of UNITE, from the merger of AMICUS and TGWU, was seen as a potential rival both in Unison core areas and newer public service provision (Unison 2007).

The report stated that Unison could increase its membership by 2010 to 1.5 million members and in doing so increase membership participation in Unison structures. The emphasis was clearly on the need to develop more participatory orientations of Unison membership. Refocusing of staff from administrative tasks to organising work was seen as key to these objectives being met. The future vision was set out as follows:

Regional Organisers are able to make building local organisation their chief focus.

Regional Organisers are able to practice proactive management of their areas of branch and employer responsibilities. They are accountable for local organisation and working in partnership with lay members, and their casework load is lightened to allow them to do this.

We build workplace activism so there are more lay members able to organise and represent members.

There is a clear career development structure for organising staff, leading them from a role primarily based on recruitment, through more senior responsibility for organising and branch development, right up to regional management level.

Organising staff have training and development plans to equip them fully for their future roles, help them meet their potential and allow the union to develop future managers and leaders.

Administrative posts are, over time, converted to organising roles, with as many current staff as possible being developed into new roles and future posts prioritised for organising.

Our workforce more accurately reflects our membership's diversity".

Unison 2007a

The objectives of MtOC reiterated some of the original objectives in Unison whilst adding the managerial challenges of effective and efficient organisation:

1. Recruiting, Organising and representing members
2. Negotiating and bargaining on behalf of members and promoting equality

3. Campaigning and promoting Unison on behalf of members
4. Develop an effective and efficient union

The revised staffing structure is illustrated in figure 5.2

Unison Regional Support post MtOC

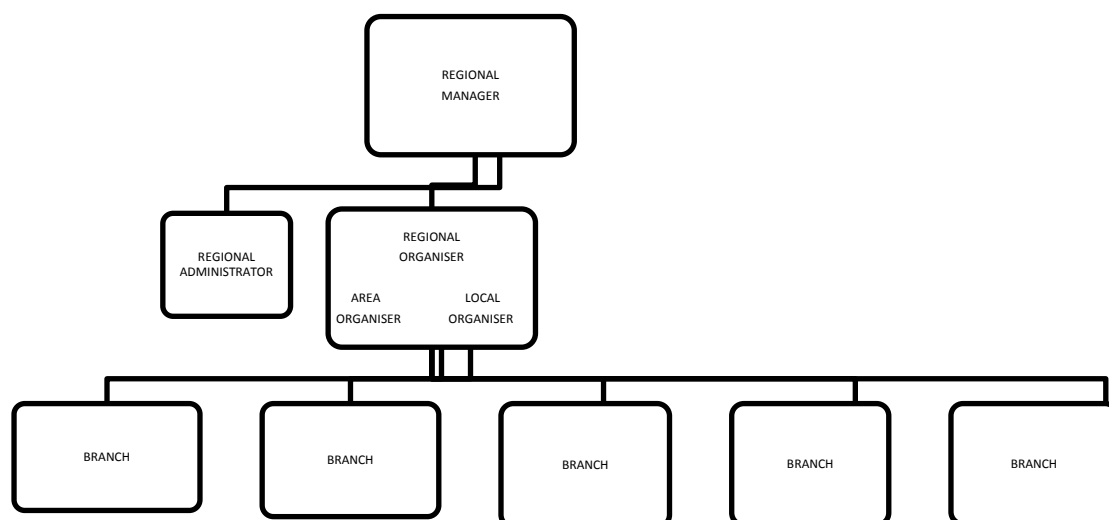


Figure 5.2

What Unison management believed was that this new staffing structure would also support a realisation that:

UNISON must embed the emphasis on recruitment and organising into our union to allow us to develop branch and workplace organisation; build our activist base and help branches deal with a growing demand for casework and representation

Unison 2007a

This staffing plan was to gradually reduce the number of ROs, in doing so switching the emphasis of the role to managing other organising staff with amended duties:

Managing a small team e.g. casework team, team of area and/or local organisers. Supervising the work of area organisers and local organisers when they are engaged in organising projects with the Regional Organiser's branches

Unison undated

In practice the case work team did not materialise and given the emphasis on recruitment the support for casework and representation was to be diluted. Local and Area Organisers were primarily employed to support recruitment activity whilst the latter also had responsibility for low level representational work (Unison 2007). The further reduction proposed in the number of Unison FTOs would be compensated by significant increases in staffing resource for Unison organising work. This development had major implications for Unison ROs, their role, their position within Unison and their relations with branches. For the latter the potential for ROs to become more remote given reductions in numbers, their managerial responsibilities and the possibility for region/branch interface being with other grades of staff primarily focused on recruitment/organising was evident. The increase in organising staff also enhances the potential, given this focus, for Unison's organisational ability to assert national and regional union priorities over those at branch level.

Conclusion

Whilst the rationale for the formation of Unison was partly in response to the compulsory competitive tendering of public services and forms of new public management, the subsequent structure which emerged failed to address the challenges of a changing industrial relations terrain. Since merger, problems in connection with support for branches continue. Given Unison's own research has identified the prime reason for membership being 'protection at work' this rationale has not been central to strategy. The increasing complexity of workplace representation, the proliferation of workers individual rights and the increase in workplaces themselves presents major challenges for Unison. This is compounded by the lack of workplace organisation in many unionised workplaces that guarantees

individual issues continue to be conceptualised and dealt with as exactly that rather than as symptoms of issues that should be dealt with collectively. Many issues such as performance targets, competency and discipline for sickness absence are a reflection of prevailing balances of power and are arguments for collective mobilisation.

A focus on internal structures encouraging member participation and with it a robust lay democracy developed. Whilst strategic objectives were identified, with management systems and support for staff to achieve those objectives put in place, such objectives, primarily around levels of recruitment were never met. These repeated failures did not meet with any recognition that ambitions for a bottom up, outwardly focused trade union had not been met. Instead arbitrary targets, set top down and dispersed throughout an inwardly focused union prevailed. Top down initiatives attempting to invigorate membership activism may work against the interests of those in established positions whether paid or lay. An inherent conservatism within unions militates against organising and may explain why later, post - WOW, organising became synonymous with recruitment. The introduction of the 'Organising Model' through WOW training emphasising the building of union organisation around workplace issues was not sustained confirming a lack of a long term commitment to organising as proposed through the 'organising model'.

The organising model was introduced through WOW training and later diffused into core training of lay representatives, thereby reducing the time spent on training for representational work. This reduction was despite the stated objectives of delegating such work to branches and with pre-existing issues around quality of support for members at branch level. As found elsewhere (Carter 2000) it seems that confusion over understanding of approaches to trade union work hinders strategy with conflicting definitions of organising, the contrasting organising and servicing models being seen as alternative choices, with organising defined as when workers are represented by lay representatives and not FTOs. Crucially the option of orientation towards encouraging active as opposed to passive union membership as espoused through the 'organising model' is confused on two counts. Firstly through what seems

to be the relegation of the importance of representation (servicing) although workplace issues provide the opportunity to build union organisation, as promoted in the WOW course and secondly by defining union activism through participation in Unison's own internal structures. The new staffing structure which emerged under the MtOC heading reduces support for representational work whilst increasing staff resources for recruitment/organising activity. The RO in MtOC has responsibility for both staff and branches to achieve nationally set recruitment targets consistent with a view that stronger management would lead to achievement of strategic objectives.

Whilst transformation, as claimed by Waddington and Kerr (2009), has occurred, the suggestion that Unison is now an organising union requires further examination. The nature and structure of Unison would require radical transformation for it to be described in such terms. Given internal interests prevailed at the time of merger and became embedded in the new union structure it is unlikely that such change will occur without an impending crisis. Vested interests at national and local level, the former focusing on recruitment while the latter stemming from internal routinisation, mean that without any serious dialogue and examples of victories based on mobilisation of members the prospect to become an organising union remains highly unlikely.

Furthermore with the importance of workplace representation as the key reason for joining a union, dilution of representational capacity, could be a major strategic error. The following chapters present the primary research and will consider some of the consequences of such choice through the impact of Unison organising strategies on workplaces and the development of managerial controls which attempt to limit the autonomy of the FTO subordinating members' issues to the broader objectives of Unison.

Chapter Six: The Relevance of Unison Organising Strategies to Workplace Industrial Relations

Introduction

Chapter five identified the importance to Unison management, from inception, of having a national plan for increasing membership. The national recruitment plan was replaced by the national organising and recruitment strategy. However the main objective of the new organising strategy remained the same, to increase membership. Effectively organising strategy became limited to objectives of achieving nationally set recruitment targets. This chapter, in confirming these limitations, identifies widespread confusion in defining and applying union organising work.

At a national level understandably the organising strategy is central in considerations, but the proposition that union leaderships/senior management can direct approaches and priorities for organising work effectively is questionable. In trade union organising terms size does matter and with a multitude of union recognised workplaces with different priorities at any given time, a national organising strategy is not a priority at the union workplace. There are common issues in workplaces which could make a national organising strategy relevant. This could be achieved through redirecting resources to buttress organising work which itself would be determined by workplace issues e.g. bullying in the NHS.

Given union priorities are contested, the chapter considers how organising strategy relates to FTOs and impacts on industrial relations. What is revealed is as significant industrial issues arise, as well as in the more routine union work at branch and workplace level, national organising strategies have little relevance in subsequent union responses. Where they do impact is in influencing the nature of industrial relations and the level of support for branches in conducting those relations by focusing on recruitment and neglecting workplace and industrial issues. Illustration of this claim is through a critical incident that examines the outsourcing of a public service, the later restructure of that service and the experiences of lay activists within

the affected workplace. This critical incident confirms that the impact of organising and organising strategy in A-Region is consistent with other Unison regions.

The potential for significant internal disconnection from the objectives set by Unison nationally with the priorities of lay representatives in branches and Unison ROs is apparent. The implications from this disconnection will be considered in the following chapter in the context of Unison management and efforts to both control and incorporate the RO into a role, more managerial in outlook.

Unison organising strategy and objectives

The development of national plans for Unison commenced with the National Recruitment Plan (NRP) announced in 1995. The main objective was increasing union membership from 1.2 million to 1.5 million by 2000 (Waddington and Kerr 2009). Whilst such an increase may enhance union power and influence and with it collective bargaining and other representational outcomes, without that stated intent the effect of such targets maybe viewed as merely enhancing and reinforcing the union's institutional interest through increasing membership subscription income. With the apparent adoption of US and Australian organising methods, encouraged by the TUC, Unison reviewed the National Recruitment Plan (NRP). This led to the development of the National Organising and Recruitment Strategy (NORS) in 1997. Recruitment targets remained a key objective but in addition the strategy was aimed at transforming the role of the Unison RO from that of a servicer to an organiser.

A strategy based on a belief, which was not evidenced, is questionable at best. The stated objective of increasing membership by 2007 to 1.7 million members (an increase of 500,000) and by 2010 to the figure of 2 million was extremely optimistic and suggested a failure at a senior level to consider the nature of trade union organisation, the political economy and the climate of industrial relations. In effect such targets are meaningless when no explanation or detailed planning for how this is to be achieved is offered.

Such optimism may have been a product of the enthusiasm engendered through the perception given of US and Australian organising success and the adoption of WOW training courses. However this ignored both immediate experience in Unison where membership levels had fallen from 1.47 million in 1993 after merger, to 1.24 million by 1998 (Unison internal data) and evidence from abroad where in the Australian experience, despite the election of a Labour government, union membership had continued to fall with liberalisation of the economy (Rigby et al 2004). Nevertheless Unison regions were required to develop plans to support the national strategy.

Unison identifies four main objectives in its organising work and these are represented in the strategic plan for 'A' Region:

1. Recruiting, organising, representing and retaining members
2. Negotiating and bargaining and promoting equality
3. Campaigning and promoting Unison on behalf of its members
4. Developing an efficient and effective union

UNISON 2012

The regional strategy is agreed and reviewed annually by the Regional Management Team (RMT) led by the Regional Secretary in conjunction with the leadership of the Regional lay democracy including the Regional Convenor and Deputy Convenors. In theory the lay democracy is representing the views of the membership. However with the emphasis on recruitment and the relegation of the importance of representation of members the disparity found in expectations of the RO role (see below and chapters seven and eight), suggests that senior lay representatives are themselves disconnected from branches and supporting theory of an emergent lay union bureaucracy (Hyman 1989). Alternatively it may demonstrate not so much co-option of lay representatives as the dominance of union bureaucracy over them as described by Webb and Webb (1894) and Michels (1962).

The broad objectives relate to all aspects of the RO role including representation, negotiation, recruitment and retention of members. In practice all aspects are

connected in that good representation and bargaining outcomes should lead to workers wanting to join or remain in Unison as Waddington and Kerr (2000) found. However when asked about the organising strategy at the workplace lay representatives perceive the strategy in more narrow and specific terms. According to one representative 'recruit more members is the organising strategy' (BA7); reiterated by another echoing the New Labour 'education, education, education' mantra; "recruit, recruit, recruit, I think they (the union) lose sight of other things such as representation as being important" (BA8).

These views were consistent with those held by ROs who confirmed that recruitment was seen as the organising strategy. If the organising strategy went beyond mere recruitment this intention was unclear and incoherent. In addition the recruitment methodology undermined attempts to promote membership participation and activism as espoused through the 'organising model':

I am not totally convinced Unison has an organising strategy. It is more a recruitment strategy and large sections of (Unison) management seem to understand recruitment as organising. . . I see organising as partly recruiting but around issues which is a more moral way to recruit. It is also a more effective way as if you are recruiting around an issue you tend to get people involved rather than just signing them up and your need for representatives becomes self-evident.

RO2

For this RO recruitment activity is primarily about attracting members by making the union relevant in the workplace. If this connection is made, the ability to build union organisation is evident with recruitment activity an inherent part of that process. The suggestion that such approaches have a morality to them implies that it is immoral to recruit merely for the purpose of recruitment. The importance of issue based organising was reiterated by other ROs, who also echoed the lack of clarity and vision within organising objectives:

The members are the engine of the union and organising for me is to find out what the issues are, find people who are prepared to share in dealing with the issues, and supporting them in that process by training and giving

confidence. It is not clear what we are organising for. Unison says it wants an organising union but I don't think they know what that means.

RO9

In underlining this lack of clarity another RO speculated that the purpose of the organising strategy is to serve the institutional interest of the union:

I don't know what we are organising for . . . I do feel now that for the union as an organisation it is more about maintaining their ability to function and grow as an organisation. It is almost for their benefit . . . like a corporate interest.

RO4

This suggestion of corporate objectives within trade unions echoes the limited scope of US business unionism referred to in chapter two. There seems no evidence of any consideration by Unison management of organising as a vehicle for building workplace power. However it does offer an explanation for a purpose to a national organising strategy even if one of limited ambition. Whilst one RO believed that 'we are organising for equality, decent pay and pensions and a fairer society. It is crucial for the union to have that wider outlook' (RO3) there was little support for that view in practice. It reflected what should be, as opposed to the reality of the organising strategy. Indeed others thought such goals to improve working life were now secondary at the altar of recruitment:

In a sense the ultimate judgement of success is focused on recruitment and not on whether in fact we have got good terms and conditions for our members as that has taken lesser importance.

RO1

This latter view suggests that union orientation is even more limited than conservative union forms such as business unionism and the face of the vested interest dominates. ROs are expected to champion recruitment activity, while representation and issue based organising work becomes of secondary importance. In this sense the connection between union objective and strategy with institutional interests is apparent. This relationship has created a sense of unease with Unison's approach to organising work. Whilst identifying a connection between strategy and objectives, which is important as

without understanding of objectives the strategy fails, those objectives are seen as mistaken. The following sums up a frustration common among many staff and lay representatives interviewed who believed Unison had become increasingly inward looking and self-serving in its day to day operations:

There are times when I worry that what Unison is organising for is its own existence . . . We go about setting up canteen stalls to recruit for the purpose of recruiting not addressing issues our members face. The right wing press say unions are self-serving organisation and I do think there may be an element of truth in that now . . . We should be about maintaining and protecting jobs, improving terms and conditions and it should be about influencing whatever government is in power to make society better. We have a wealth of experience among our members and we do not use it . . . We have a bigger role to play and we don't play it.

RO2

The reference to canteen stall recruiting has wider significance. The respective organising teams within the Region, including the ROs, have dedicated weeks where working as a team they focus on a targeted county within the region and as many as fifteen staff position themselves with recruitment stands in prominent positions such as staff restaurants with the aim of recruiting new members and new activists. However the self-serving view of this recruitment activity within Unison is reinforced in one email exchange over the Regional Manager's proposal to increase the number of such weeks. A recent recruit to the RO role responded that 'we should do this extra week as it does work and we need to get more members if we are to keep our jobs'.

Such admission of motivation for recruitment activity is not surprising when Unison management understandably highlights the impact of the Coalition government's policies on jobs in the public sector and, how in turn, that affects union membership levels, union finances and the potential consequences for staffing levels (Unison 2012). However, when combined with the consequence of recruitment targets being the primary objective of the union, a climate of short-termism is created where staff are exhorted to increase membership by management through monthly reports on recruitment activity identifying Unison branches achieving or failing to meet targets. Inevitably the regular weekly recruitment events and the prominence given to

recruitment targets have implications for relations with constituent parts of the union and with employers whose cooperation is required. They ultimately become central to the nature and purpose of union organising work.

The Unison Regional Organiser in the Unison organising strategy

In general terms the FTO relationship with activists and members is one of dual purpose. On the one hand, the FTO has the role of the servant of the union membership. On the other hand, the status is as an authorised official of the union ensuring adherence to union rules, collective agreements and employment laws. To reiterate an earlier observation, FTOs entirely legitimately undertake actions that can control the members but simultaneously they remain employees or servants of that same membership (Hyman 1975). Unison branch priorities will include the demands of members for representation, advice and support. Consequently national and regional issues are often secondary to the immediate workplace related priorities in branches whether from members, lay representatives or both.

Traditionally FTOs have held sufficient autonomy for deciding work priorities at any given time, whether those priorities are membership or institutionally driven (Kelly and Heery 1994). However the increasing prominence to achieving recruitment targets constrained that traditional ability:

We are put under pressure by Region to get the recruitment figures so when we meet with branches we need to talk about what the branch is doing about recruitment but the branches naturally want to talk about their issues.

RO9

If Unison was being transformed into an organising union, emphasizing the importance of building workplace organisation, then it would be evident that issues for branches would be prioritising union work and addressing priorities by organising members. Any recruitment activity would be undertaken in the context of addressing these issues of importance to the union membership. This approach presents the possibility for some synergy between the differing priorities of constituent parts of the union. However the

overarching priority of recruitment moves Unison away from both organising and servicing orientations:

I don't think branches embrace the Unison organising agenda as all they are asked to do is recruiting. Organisation is seen as coming on the back of recruitment when it should be the other way around. Branches and members still focus on the service they get when they need help. Now that service can turn into an organising and recruiting opportunity but without delivering the service all else is lost. What Unison does not recognise is we deliver a service for members that's valued.

RO4

In this RO's view once again the organising work of the union should develop around workplace issues and is consistent with an orientation of issue based organising espoused within the WOW course and the 'organising model'. The RO echoed a frustration that what Unison management refers to as organising is recruiting. Consequently the recruitment focus debilitates any efforts at workplace organising. Further, what is seen as servicing by Regional Management is for this RO part of an organising process. One lay representative confirmed the success of this approach at a time when the branch was in crisis:

We have built the branch by the scruff of the neck. There had been a fall out of officers and our current Regional Organiser was allocated to the branch about that time. Our original focus was trying to get activists, setting up some decent administration, and build a decent relationship with the employer. We changed the recognition agreement, we got extra facility time, we used a campaign to raise our profile . . . it was about building the branch up from the bottom.

BA2

However whilst the branch in question was recognised as a success by the measures of JABO (see Chapters Five and Seven) their modus operandi brought them into difficulty with what region saw as the priorities. Consequently the relationship between region and branches was increasingly being perceived as one of employer/employee. A number of lay representatives expressed some concern at this development given they were not employees of the union. One lay representative complained; "We are volunteers, don't boss us around . . . encourage us" (BA3). This plea was directed more

at Regional Management than their own RO who was seen to be most supportive of the Branch. This support was reciprocated by the branch's recognition of the demands placed on ROs under objectives set by the Regional Management:

We know that targets for recruitment are set and that there is some pressure on the Regional Organiser to make sure we achieve our recruitment target and we have to note that and that our relationship is a bit of give and take over what we want and what Region wants.

BA3

This conclusion suggests that in organised branches the relationship between the RO and the branch is based on mutual agreement on priorities. Consequently some fusion of the servant of the union members' position with that of the control or authority of the FTO emerges. What this fusion also implies however is that even with a productive relationship between the Unison branch and the RO the focus on workplace issues can be compromised by the target settings imposed by national Unison management. One branch summed up their resistance to recruitment focused activity by stating 'we don't do recruitment, we do representation' (BA1). The recruitment was as a consequence of the representation.

The requirement for ROs to become managers of branches was partly articulated through some members of the regional management team expressing the view at team meetings and staff conference that where lay representatives were provided with specific facility time for union work by the employer, that time was afforded on the basis of their Unison position and hence it was legitimate for the union to manage that resource. This failed to recognise the purpose of granting the facility time; given employers see this in the context of supporting constructive industrial relations at the specific workplace and not for the institutional benefit of Unison.

Vertical and Horizontal disconnection

The dominance of JABO priorities in the daily union work were implicated in a breakdown of communication both within Region and from National to Region. The failure to integrate national, regional and branch preoccupations resulted in branches

and ROs tending to operate within silos unaware of events elsewhere that could have relevance or consequence for their own issues. One Regional Manager confirmed that:

We don't know what is going on elsewhere. I got told by chance that there was a legal case going off in one Trust which has major implications for one of our Trusts. There is no proper coordination around the industrial work of the union: it is very fragmented at the minute.

RM1

Disconnections at a level suggest that core issues and membership interests receive an alarmingly low level of priority. Regional team meetings are dominated by discussions of recruitment levels and activity. Broader or specific industrial issues that have current relevance to the ROs in the team had little room for consideration. Sector matters at a national level were no longer considered appropriate for dissemination of information and discussion at team meetings although teams were structured around key sectors. As one RO (RO4) complained:

Other than giving me specific targets or tasks region has very little relevance. I think the role of the RO has become far more isolated. I don't have those discussions with colleagues about what is happening in their area of responsibility. How do we approach the same issues and have some common strategy? The team meetings don't address the issues we are dealing with on a day to day basis. We no longer have service group meetings which I found very valuable because we discussed the issues which all of us were facing across the piece and allowed us to develop common strategies and approaches. There is a total disconnecting between National and Region, the practical experience of the RO being able to influence and guide policy has gone.

A consequence of such isolation is that ROs can view the branches they deal with as their real team and not the Regional team, contrary to theory of FTO dislocation from the rank and file:

I don't think a lot is done about the isolation you can feel out there. You can put a barrier with branches so you don't go native as it were. I feel the danger is you could become native they become your family as you are working with branches on a day to day basis not the Regional team.

RO8

With some irony the increasing emphasis on teamwork in relation to recruitment activity has the counter effect of alienating some ROs within the team and encouraging their alignment with allocated branches. (The contrasting approach of other ROs will be considered in more detail in Chapter Seven when examining the developing emphasis on union management in Unison). Field notes covering regional and team meetings consistently record branches - themselves inundated with bureaucracy and run by gate keepers - being referred to by Regional Managers, and some ROs, as barriers to union recruitment efforts. In any focus on the failure of union organising strategies, it was not the strategy itself that was considered, but individuals within local branches.

For branches a common complaint was that the turnover in ROs made it impossible to develop constructive relations with region. This turnover was seen to be the responsibility of the Regional Management and is summed up in the following contribution:

The Regional Organiser patches are now too big and change too often. I would love to have the situation where in one county the health branches have had the same Regional Organiser for years and as Branch Secretaries we need Regional Organisers who will support us. I have to say the variation in standard between Regional Organisers is huge.

BA1

One of the consequences of MtOC was the increased scope of RO industrial responsibility, in addition to management of other Unison staff. The perception of significant variation in work standards of ROs is consistent with the view of ROs and Regional Management. The practice of recruiting staff without industrial experience was manifesting itself in the identification by lay representatives of inconsistent standards of industrial support.

The impact of organising work on industrial relations

In their analysis of the TUCs New Unionism Carter and Fairbrother (2000) identified TUC strategy as one of partnership with good employers and organising workers against bad employers. This suggests that the two strands of new unionism were

mutually exclusive. Unison has pursued an industrial agenda of partnership with employers whilst promoting organising within recognised workplaces. In the public sector trade union organisation and recognition has been a traditional feature. However contemporary advocates of closer collaboration with employers fail to acknowledge the ever increasing impact of marketization undermining the public service ethos and its impact on matters of workplace control and productivity (Carter et al 2012). This blind spot is illustrated in the view of a national senior manager:

Employers have always been sympathetic to our aims and I think that in turn as we deliver public service we have a common interest with the employer to deliver high quality services to the community and so partnership in that context is based on the same objectives. So it is not like the private sector where the employer is trying to maximise profits at the expense of our members. So I am not opposed to partnership working in the public services because we have that common aim of providing high quality services.

NM1

In contrast to the perspective of collaboration, an organising union, given growing member participation in workplaces, would produce increasing challenge to managerial prerogative and greater potential for conflict within the workplace. However the results of Unisons 'organising' do not suggest that such conflict has emerged, supporting the contention that 'organising' is more rhetoric than reality. There has been minimal impact on union relations with employers:

I don't think employers would have noted much difference really. If so only in pockets where we are asking 'can we walk around the workplace please because we are an organising union? Can we turn up to your new starters' inductions? Occasionally they may have requests for us to go back and consult people.

RM3

This view is reinforced at RO level (RO4):

Over the years with major employers I have had to deal with I have built good relations and they have helped our organising work. Most employers will see the benefit of a good relation with the union and how the Regional Organiser approaches that relationship is key.

Organising work in trade unions has to consider the nature of industrial relations, the power relations between workers and employers and the issues of importance for workers, integral to a coherent practice. However there exists a distinct lack of appreciation of such matters in broader strategic consideration within Unison. The promotion of partnership working has in some workplaces undermined notions of building workplace union organisation, democracy and accountability. Whilst bemoaning gatekeepers at one level, (senior branch and staff side (joint union) officers who maintain their own position through obstruction of, and resistance to new union activists), partnership agreements were reinforcing the gatekeeper position of a minority of lay officers, entrenching lay bureaucracy and undermining limited workplace democracy. One member of the regional management team concluded:

In relation to partnership agreements I think we should have a divorce. I think they have not benefited us at all. I think in the beginning the honeymoon period was nice. We got more facility time, nicer offices but then they really turned the tables on us. Some senior reps are in cahoots with senior managers, employed in HR positions in staff side positions. These were sold on facility time. In reaction I have had groups of members who have transferred to other unions and then took all their Unison facility time with them. People I know working against us with the employer are sitting in union posts and we cannot shift them.

RM3

This particular experience related to a specific NHS Trust where an arrangement was made whereby some Unison branch officers were seconded into the Human Resources department and had joint union/management roles as championing workplace representation, equality and partnership working. This arrangement was described by the RO who had inherited the situation:

This was a partnership between senior Unison representatives and senior management that was not based on equal power but on how a clique of people on both sides came to a mutual win/win situation regardless of the impact on the union. I have never experienced a partnership agreement which helps organising.

RO9

One RO confirmed Hymans (1989) identification of extended union bureaucracy by proposing that:

The real union bureaucrat is the Branch Secretary who gets wrapped up with management in a cosy relationship. For me partnership agreements inhibit our organising work and this is not grasped by our (Unison) management.

RO3

The Regional Manager confirmed this partnership agreement enabling this problematic, incestuous relationship was made with the full knowledge of Unison regional management. This experience demonstrated a lack of knowledge and understanding of developments in and implications for contemporary industrial relations. The nature of recognition agreements and their connection to organising work seemed absent from consideration at regional and national management levels.

This issue exemplifies the importance of discussion within Unison teams on contemporary industrial issues. On partnership agreements the evidence indicated a tendency noted by Upchurch *et al.* (2012) for some lay activists to be seduced into internal meetings with employers, disengaging from the membership in the process:

The Reps can get sucked into thinking that what being a trade union rep is about is going along to all these partnership forums and getting all these important papers from management, sometimes under non-disclosure terms. They can get into 'we are all in this together mode' managing the organisation. The union role is partly to manage the employee relations but we are there primarily to represent the members. Educate, agitate and organise, which predates, and will exist long after partnership agreements. We have to get back to talking to members about their issues and not just meeting with management on their issues.

RO2

A healthy scepticism was displayed towards partnership by most long serving ROs. When difficult or conflicting decisions and positions are taken tensions with employers still emerged regardless of partnership agreements. However the view that, given union density levels, moderate approaches to industrial relations should prevail remained influential:

The union is becoming less relevant because of declining density levels and one of the major issues for us in local government is the fact that we only survive in some places because of employer largesse. We have density levels that range from 20 to 40% but we still have recognition, we still have bargaining rights and the dangers we face for the next five years is that some employers may decide that we are no longer representative of the workforce and therefore why waste our time talking to us.

NM1

This admission that, despite national strategies, the workplace legitimacy of Unison has weakened during a period when workplace issues abound from pay levels, pension and retirement changes to job cuts and insecurity, all exacerbated by the austerity policies of the coalition government, is recognition of strategic failure.

The research also identified the increasing risk to union organisation of the actions of Unison staff inexperienced in industrial relations. An AO, with no previous industrial relations experience (but now an RO) informed hospital staff of their impending redundancy on the basis of management confirming the need to make departmental savings. The purpose of the revelation was to motivate, or scare, staff into joining Unison as his account illustrates:

Only last week I went in to a large hospital where there is to be job losses due to financial cuts. We called an emergency members meeting in one department and then afterwards the Branch Secretary phones in a flap because the Human Resources Director is alleging I have been going around telling people they are going to be made redundant and yes I am saying that. The employer is getting wound up because they don't want to pay redundancy. So I am agitating getting people organised and the employer is getting very cross about it.

AO4

Paid staff of Unison engaged in scaremongering prior to any announcements would probably not reflect well on the union both in terms of relations with members and the employer. Nevertheless what is of greater concern is that there is no recognition of the faux pas committed.

Unison national organising strategy is a recruitment strategy disconnected from members workplace priorities. Furthermore dealing with workplace issues is

undertaken within individual branches without the room for consideration of broader issues with implications beyond the specific branch. The work of individual ROs are disconnected from each other within the region, the national union and in some instances the branch, given the priority to manage facility time and recruitment activity. There has been a failure to link the nature of workplace industrial relations to organising work. Some of the newer organising staff are significantly inexperienced in industrial relations questioning union legitimacy to employers and the risk of losing confidence and support of local representatives and members. The demographic profile of ROs in Unison 'A' Region only heightens these concerns. The critical incident below both reinforces these findings and confirms these issues are not limited to 'A' Region but are symptoms of wider concern for Unison.

'A' Region is the location for a national industrial responsibility relating to a public sector supply chain service. In 2006 this service, (PSSC), was outsourced to a well-known private sector European distribution company anonymised here as EDC. The national committee for EDC is located in A-region with representatives from several other Unison regions participating enabling some comparison and assessment as to the commonality of issues raised in the research in Unison more broadly. In addition EDC presents an opportunity for broader assessment of national strategy beyond a specific region. The EDC national lay negotiating committee agreed to undertake a focus group discussion on their experience pre and post privatisation and the effect of Unisons organising strategy on their work for Unison members.

Critical Incident 1 European Distribution Company (EDC)

Background

EDC was awarded a ten year contract to supply a wide range of goods from basic foodstuffs to sophisticated medical equipment to the NHS. The transfer was not without controversy with a New Labour government privatising jobs in the NHS affecting members of the largest public sector union in the UK, itself a Labour Party affiliate. Through this affiliation the local union branches within PSSC, located at sites across five Unison regions in England, combined to lobby local Labour MPs leading to a

number of meetings with ministers in the Department of Health. In internal Unison notes it is recorded that the lay representatives supported by their national FTO (an RO in 'A' Region) raised a number of concerns including the lack of transparency in decision making. The National Organising and Recruitment (NORS) strategy was in place as the campaign to oppose this privatisation gathered momentum.

The campaign involved union members as well as lay representatives, supported by respective ROs for the workplace sites, the National Office Health team, and the National legal team and utilised the affiliated political fund structures within Unison. Although the campaign had involvement across the union, the NORS was not considered when devising strategy, developing the campaign and determining objectives.

Following the confirmation of the decision to outsource to EDC, Unison members voted in favour of strike action. Issues which emerged around the strike ballot highlighted the constraints in which trade unions continue to operate in the UK. The revised statutory definition of a trade dispute was to make problematic the principle of opposing privatisation. Whilst the service was historically part of the NHS, and there was sympathy from other Unison members, support was limited to cash donations with secondary or solidarity actions ruled out by employment law. As confirmed by the current Unison representative group on the joint national negotiating and consultation committee (NJCF) of EDC the objection to the transfer was primarily threefold; concern for future terms and conditions, job security and significantly the change from public servant to worker for a private sector organisation: "Life in the NHS was not perfect by any means but we had some security and we identified strongly with the NHS" (NA4). The subsequent transfer provides some evidence to support, with qualification, the notion of union renewal through decentralisation of public services. It also illustrates the irrelevance of Unison's national organising strategy even where national units of Unison are utilised and the commonality of issues for activists across the union beyond 'A' Region.

From the NHS to EDC

Industrial relations issues in PSSC prior to transfer manifested mainly in large numbers of disciplinary cases as part of attempts by PSSC management to assert their prerogative over the workforce:

We had a lot of disciplinary cases in the NHS mainly around sickness absence. There was often conflict with the General Managers who were in charge of each site. We won a number of cases at Employment Tribunal, including reinstatements which we know are rare. This had the effect of many cases being settled.

NA2

On the collective front, while part of the NHS, local negotiations on pay and other terms and conditions of employment, did not arise as the members were part of the much broader constituency of NHS workers covered by the NHS ancillary staffs bargaining mechanisms; 'we were part of a Whitley Council and did not get involved in negotiations over our pay' (NA3). In terms of pay offers 'we were part of the general pay ballot for the NHS' (NA4).

Union representatives at PSSC did get involved in some negotiations around terms and conditions at a local level but these were limited in scope and eventually removed with the implementation of the NHS 'Agenda for Change' which replaced the Whitley council system with a unified NHS Staff Council:

We were all on NHS pay rates but we had some local agreements around overtime and such when asked in at the last minute, this all went with Agenda for Change.

NA4

There was however a mechanism for workplace consultations but this was limited in scope: 'We had a national committee covering the warehouses. The agenda for meetings was about reorganisation as the small warehouses were consolidated into larger sites' (NA2).

In discussion on the subsequent transfer to EDC it was interesting to note the dynamics between those who had been involved in the consultations around the

transfer and those who became members of the NJCF post transfer but at the time were not union office holders. There were differences in perspective and how effective were the adoption of oppositional tactics. Those who had been involved in negotiations found themselves having to defend some of the decisions taken and their timing. These matters emphasise the importance of experienced industrial support for members at times of significant conflict and threats to job security. The lack of relevance of Unison national organising strategy at these times is evident.

PSSC lay representatives raised the profile of the proposed privatisation within Unison, with politicians and in national media outlets. A number of meetings were held with ministers at the Department of Health, initially a junior Health Minister, Jane Kennedy, then later two secretaries of state, Patricia Hewitt and Andy Burnham, with the latter supportive to the concerns of Unison representatives. The decision to transfer was signed off by Patricia Hewitt with Andy Burnham inheriting responsibility for implementation, 'Hewitt signed off the deal. We then had meetings with Burnham where we got some concessions around no two tier workforce etc.' (NA2) and:

We also got concession from Andy Burnham that NHS Trusts would be expected to use us and not seek alternatives as this was a real concern. There was a demonstration at the Unison conference in Liverpool from our depot and a fringe meeting about the future employment by EDC.

NA5

In addition the question of this privatisation was taken to the Labour Party conference:

. . . which forced a statement from Tony Blair to commit to protect us from what EDC had wanted to do to staffing which included the use of zero hours contracts.

NA2

Although achieving these concessions the decision was taken to hold a strike ballot across PSSC which produced a 'yes' vote in protest at the decision to transfer employment to EDC. Strike days were held across PSSC but failed to persuade the government to change its stance. The timing of the strike caused some frustration among some activists:

Many members wanted to do the action when it was announced in 2004 that there would be consideration of outsourcing and it was too late when it happened.

NA4

And:

Our members thought that Unison had turned their backs on our membership because we wanted to go out earlier and send a message to the government.

NA5

This view was expressed in the knowledge that Unison was following the alternative strategy of applying for a judicial review of the decision to outsource PSSC. As it happened 'the judicial review was withdrawn due to issues around the legality of the application' (NA2). One activist summed up the feelings by stating that 'industrial action was a token gesture as it had already been sold off' (NA1).

Nevertheless the industrial action was broadly supported across PSSC illustrated by an overall increase in membership despite some existing members resigning from the union. These resignations inevitably caused some animosity, and given the industrial action failed to prevent the transfer, some negativity among activists. However commitments on job security, TUPE protections and guarantees around zero hour's contracts acknowledged the significant influence of the union on the process. As one lay representative explained, 'there was good press coverage at the time and we got commitment from (EDC) that they would not close any depot' (NA2). With the decision to take industrial action, a message was sent to the new employer, EDC, as one activist explained: 'It was a very strong message to our new employer that our members are prepared to put up if necessary' (NA3).

Early days post-transfer were not without their problems due to management failings and a belief held by some managers that the transfer to the private sector would provide for a shift of power in their favour:

I think after we were transferred some managers tried to stamp their authority over us in that they were from EDC by the ever increasing use of disciplinary procedures and bullying. However we constantly challenged these decisions through the procedure and our efforts eventually led to a greater reluctance to undertake disciplinary procedures. They have now backed off and it is rare to get vindictive bullying cases now if it's a disciplinary there is a genuine reason.

NA6

This view was supported by other representatives who now acknowledged that in fact 'since EDC became the employer the disciplinary cases have gone down' (NA2). This was seen to in part be due to Unison representations:

We have complained about training for managers in the past, they are now being better supported and they don't go onto disciplinary procedures without being prepared, so there are fewer cases.

NA4

It was not only in relation to procedural matters where the Unison representatives have been able to deliver better working outcomes. Union representatives were now directly involved in collective bargaining on pay and other terms and conditions of employment.

With some irony being in the private sector has taken the membership to a degree outside of the influence of austerity policies that has resulted in significant real terms pay decreases for public sector workers:

The terms and conditions which were TUPE'd under have not altered and in terms of pay we have actually done far better than if we were still in the NHS, as the public sector pay freeze would have hit us. So that's to the credit of this committee that we have involved members in the pay claims and the threat of industrial action has helped deliver pay settlements which were acceptable, although we are still behind where we would like to be.

NA3

These key issues have been addressed through traditional methods of union organising regardless of organising strategy. In doing so Unison has recognised the achievements

of the 'A' Region located branch in EDC with it being identified in the JABO process as the best organised branch in the region.

Traditional trade union issues around job security and protection of terms and conditions had, through established industrial relations processes, delivered significant protections for members, building union organisation and collective strength at the workplace. The important role of experienced ROs was acknowledged and that experience coupled with that of the lay committee was to stand union organisation in good stead post privatisation. Consequently union strategy which downplays such importance by recruiting staff without industrial experience and focusing on recruitment at the expense of important industrial issues is questionable.

The transfer to EDC saw the enhancement of the role of union representatives with a new collective agreement establishing the NJCF with terms of reference that included negotiations on all pay and terms and conditions of employment, in addition to consultations on business performance and human resource policies: 'the NJCF with EDC has broadened, we are a bigger group and we now negotiate our own pay and are consulted more regularly' (NA4).

Union organising at EDC

The transfer to the private sector and the consequences for bringing key bargaining issues closer to the union representatives and union members at PSSC suggests evidence to support the proposition that decentralisation of decision making and collective bargaining can lead to union renewal as proposed by Fairbrother (1989, 1996) and others. It was the view of the Unison representatives at EDC that union organisation had improved and their own abilities and competencies as union representatives had been enhanced. One newer representative stated that 'personally I think union organisation has improved' (NA6). A view endorsed by others (NA3):

I think it has improved as we have got more experience at negotiating and dealing with issues such as pay, redundancies and industrial action. We have had good support from our Regional Organisers over the years but especially the current Regional Organiser given the issues we have had to deal with.

This appreciation of RO support is contrasted with the national objectives and strategies of the union:

Our workplace branches always have had good involvement from members and support from Regional Organisers. There are national strategies and regional strategies but they don't do anything to assist.

NA2

Given the major issues this group of Unison representatives have faced their view of Unison's organising strategy should be a cause of concern. The strategy had no relevance to workplace issues but was seen to be impinging on support in addressing those issues:

Don't you think the strategy or strategies have one aim only it begins with r and that is recruitment? I don't say that is not important but our issues at the workplace become secondary to recruitment. I bring issues up at region (not 'A' Region) and they don't seem interested it's all 'we will get someone along to help you recruit.' When I want support on particular issues which have cropped at a local level I don't want a conversation about recruitment.

NA1

Furthermore the consequences of MtOC had created confusion:

I do find that we now have staff whether it is Regional Organisers, Area Organisers or Local Organisers and it is like a revolving door as they are changing all the time. You try to contact them and you are contacting the wrong person they have moved on and that's frustrating. I feel like that Unison are looking to recruit bright young things who can sell the union like an insurance policy.

NA4

What was quite striking in the views expressed by the Unison lay representatives at EDC was that although they had been able to significantly influence industrial relations outcomes they had not had the opportunity to reflect on their achievements, their own development and experience as activists. How they had harnessed different parts of Unison, with the assistance of respective ROs, to win concessions and gains for their members had not been acknowledged. Furthermore whilst appreciative in the past, these activists were increasingly questioning the validity and appropriateness of

Unison support. It was that support coupled with a willingness of members to become active in defending terms and conditions post privatisation that had enabled Unison to maintain its position across the sites of EDC. It should not be underestimated that the union faced significant challenge however and decentralisation in itself was not a panacea for a renewal of workplace trade unionism.

Conclusion

The evidence collated confirms that organising strategy in Unison is perceived by ROs and branch lay representatives as limited to recruitment. Whilst such strategy is given importance and priority at levels of Unison beyond the branch, at branch level the priority remains workplace issues relevant to Unison members. Nevertheless attempts at imposing institutional priorities relating to recruitment activity over those of the membership prevail. Despite the strategic failure to build union organisation around issues of crucial importance for workers, neglecting issue based organising approaches in the process, persistence with prioritising recruitment activity in a vacuum suggests an organisation in denial. This has implications for the role of the RO and relations with different constituent parts of Unison.

The lack of priority of workplace issues has produced working environments where ROs can be isolated, unable to approach such issues consistently, and where appropriate, strategically. Furthermore for some ROs the Unison branch becomes the source of support and solace. More widely the failure to connect strategy to workplace issues results in partnership agreements with employers that have produced relations which undermined union organisation, embedded a lay bureaucracy, and removed elected representatives' accountability to union members in the worst traditions of business unionism. In contrast experience at EDC post privatisation saw a strengthening of the role of the Unison stewards within the EDC national bargaining arrangements and an enhancement of Unison influence: achieved through traditional organising work and a combination of approaches from industrial militancy to critical engagement with the new employer.

These differing experiences highlight the problems which face unions when there exists a lack of reflective analysis, a disconnection in union work across constituencies, both vertical and horizontal and where exclusion of experienced ROs from developing industrial relations strategy is commonplace. An understanding of how the nature of union recognition agreements shape industrial relations and either facilitates or obstructs union building should be a priority for Unison managers, organising staff and lay representatives. The tendency for experienced ROs to align with branches has been confronted by the latest organising initiatives that in effect attempt to control the work of the RO so it becomes more attuned to national and not branch priorities. The following chapter illustrates and analyses this development.

Chapter Seven: Managing Organising

Introduction

Chapter three confirmed the inherent tendencies within trade unions to develop oligarchic forms of leadership from within internal bureaucracy. Such tendencies have largely been ignored in analyses of union organising yet have some significance for explaining motivations and implementation of union strategy: as are considerations of the tensions which emerge from competing and often conflicting internal interests including those of representative and represented, the short and long term and sectional as opposed to wider union interests. Development of managerial systems within unions inevitably raises questions as in whose interests are they designed to underpin or assert. The promise of reinvigorating rank and file union participation and democracy held out by emphasising grassroots organising strategies has not materialised. Yet the persistence in promoting a narrative of union organising continues. This may suggest there is an unswerving messianic view or belief that eventually such strategy will lead to union renewal. Alternatively such narratives produce opportunities for greater assertion of oligarchic interest and control. This chapter may offer some support for the former but evidence that managerial control of union work has increased as a consequence of organising strategy looks overwhelming.

Unison employs around 1200 staff and claims 1.2 million members (TUC 2014). The inevitable plurality of interests which emerge from such constituencies, with often competing industrial and political priorities, can create significant organisational challenges not least around the efficient use of resources. A degree of managerial control and responsibility is inevitable to ensure employer obligations to staff are met. This chapter illustrates how such control goes well beyond previous practice with the organising strategy used by Unison management to restrict the autonomy and extend managerial responsibilities of and to ROs. In this sense the consequence of organising strategy is to alter the role of the RO from one of primarily industrial support for union branches to that of a manager of branches and new grades of staff.

The chapter refers to expectations of regional support from Unison lay representatives and how they sit badly with the evolving role of the Unison RO. Different approaches to the FTO role have been characterised as a manager of discontent (Watson 1988) or workers' advocate (Beynon 1975). The findings here confirm contrasting approaches prevail and are identified through differing orientations amongst ROs. The previous chapter gave insight into the traditional RO approach to union branch support and industrial work. This chapter reveals a contrasting view on relations between the Unison branch and the RO expressed by Unison management and newer prototype Regional Organisers. The former RO type tends to approach union work through the demands and issues emerging from the union branches to which they have industrial responsibility. Whilst the latter are more directed by Unison management priorities and preferred approach to union organising work. Inevitably resistance to the latter approach is evident as well as a healthy scepticism as to the merits of a more managerial approach. Similar to the experience of MSF (Carter 1991), a commitment to building union organisation among traditional FTOs may not fit with the institution's approach to organising work. In contrast, the prototype approach, for entirely plausible reasons, such as future career prospects and employment security, are more compliant with the institutional approach and are consequently often viewed as 'good organisers'.

This notion of what is a 'good organiser' fits with management expectations for Unison RO roles emanating from the objectives in the MtOC strategy. How MtOC has impacted on FTO roles, relations with branches and what this means for future branch support and RO roles is examined in this chapter. The relevance of the Joint Assessment of Branch Organisation (JABO), the link with the regional annual awards night and the implications for control of RO work is considered. The attempts to assert management control of ROs is illustrated through the second critical incident 'Operation Workplace'. Chapter five referred to Unison being a member led union, suggesting a 'bottom up' approach to organising work. Given that characterisation the chapter initially considers views of what lay representatives require by way of regional support. Lay representatives in this sense are senior or experienced lay activists who

may also hold branch office positions such as Branch Secretary or Branch Chairperson. All lay representatives who contributed were involved in the industrial work of the union through representing members both on individual and collective bases.

Union support: Branch expectations

The following quotation from a branch officer of an apparently well organised large Unison branch (5000 plus members) represents a common view of the RO role and how that translates into support for Unison branches:

I think the role of the Regional Organiser varies dependant on who they are working with, depending on the experience in the branch e.g. setting up new recognition agreements, negotiating committees, support the branch in terms of recruitment and campaigning, advice on complex case all those things. I guess now the Regional Organiser supports complex cases; actually he does whatever we tell him (laughter): that is not quite true.

BA2

The support offered by ROs is dependent on a number of variables and requires some flexibility and adaptability on the RO's part. A good understanding of employment law, industrial relations procedures, significant experience of collective bargaining and an ability to contribute to recruiting and campaigning work are either implied or expressed. Absent from such consideration is an understanding of national organising strategies or a need for management of branches. One lay representative summed up their branch expectations of the RO role as 'support, guidance and advice is what we need' (BA12).

Industrial relations expertise and knowledge of employment law was crucial to the method of support for branches through the branch surgery. Held regularly this is a dedicated day or session where the RO meets the Branch Secretary, union members and workplace representatives to consider current industrial, organisational and individual issues This will include giving advice, planning, review of cases and strategy: 'I think surgeries held by ROs are brilliant, the expertise available can be used very effectively, that is a good facility' (BA 6). However not all representatives were familiar with the surgery facility and doubts were raised of the ability of some ROs to

undertake such work. Complaints regarding the availability of support, the nature of that support and at times the undermining of their position by the RO were made by some:

I do have problems getting hold of the Regional Organiser. I have to leave messages repeatedly. Sometimes they jump in without letting me know such as lodging grievances. This undermines me with the employer and eventually we fell out over it.

BA17

Another representative on a specific workplace issue of crucial importance confirmed a common perception expressed that for Unison the priority is recruitment and this overrides issues requiring representational support:

Our branch feels we have had no support from region at the time of the TUPE transfer. We were very disappointed and since the privatisation there has been some more presence but what they focus on is organising which consists of workplace meetings to recruit and not support for us in cases and dealings with our new employer.

BA20

This tension over conflicting priorities of recruitment and representation produce a lack of clarity over roles and compounds relational issues when expectations are unclear:

I am not sure what the role of the Regional Organiser is. By that what I mean is I can end up dealing with disputes, consultations and redundancies but I am not sure where my boundary is where is the demarcation between branch and region.

BA15

This confusion over expectation of the RO role and blurred lines of demarcation of responsibility extends beyond activists to staff constituencies as confirmed in the evidence of administrative staff (AS1):

Members can phone Region with an issue or for some advice and instead of what used to happen where a Regional Organiser would provide that advice some now just say refer them to the branch. The problem with that is they may have been trying to contact the branch.

The introduction of Unison Direct - the 24 hour telephone helpline for members - has added to the potential for passing members with issues around the organisation instead of responding to the issue or query. Furthermore whilst one Regional Manager complained at a staff conference that when a member phones Region for advice 'in the whole building there can be no organising staff prepared to take the call'. However, those ROs who are prepared to intervene and respond to members are perceived to be 'not the right type' (AS1) i.e. the approach adopted was more traditional.

The above evidence contrasts with more positive experiences: 'Our RO gives us lots of support she picks up cases when we cannot deal with them, or are overburdened or in private nursing homes' (BA19). In discussion with a group of representatives at a recruitment event one lay representative, again confirming the readiness of some ROs to support industrial work valued the input from the RO as 'sometimes I feel like a Sheriff with a badge but no gun'. What is apparent, given the differing tendencies in approaching union work, experience and capability, is that the availability and suitability of RO support for members and branches is a lottery. These variations would have been to a degree addressed in the past through team discussion of industrial issues but, as the previous chapter confirmed, those discussions no longer occur.

Full time officer orientations: 'traditional' and 'prototype' approaches

This absence of communication on matters of industrial importance coupled with contrasting approaches from ROs to industrial work explains the increasingly wide variance in support for Unison branches. The contrasting tendencies to union work by ROs emphasising 'top down' or 'bottom up' priorities exacerbated existing differences in style and approach to such work. As with lay representatives, high level advice on matters of employment law and representation is seen as of paramount importance by traditional ROs as typified by the following descriptions:

... the key responsibilities is still the traditional stuff which varies from branch to branch; there is still the expectation from branches that you will be available to give high level advice on negotiations and employment law situations. Most branches still expect you to become directly involved in

high level negotiations and perhaps leading on them. The amount of case work you do varies enormously depending on the branch in terms of activist experience and ability.

RO2

And:

... for me it is working at the coalface with branches; developing activists; dealing with the employers; that is where we have gained by bringing people on getting them trained up and getting them aware of their responsibilities as union representatives. The members still need advice and representation and sometimes there are occasions when we have to step in and deal with this. My priorities tend to be dictated by what's on my desk, high level case work, and getting claims to the Employment Tribunal at the last minute will take priority.

RO5

The emphasis here is on how support given to the branch stems from the needs of members and lay representatives, consistent with the 'bottom up' approach espoused. In contrast the following observation of a prototype RO (RO8) views the role as that of a manager as reflected in the terminology utilised:

The Regional Organiser is the key support for the branch. The role is to ensure they are running smoothly, to get systems in place so the branch can stand independently and is well organised and to support by meeting weekly with the Branch Secretary. If they have staff in the branch helping manage staff properly so that the **resource is used efficiently**..... My main contact is with the Branch Secretary. I also make sure there are good office systems in place and more generally good management of the Branch office. This includes recruitment support and a representative database so cases, training, and facility time reports are easily available. It is important that the branch knows what cases are live. Once all the systems are in place then eventually the Regional Organiser can step back and concentrate on other things.

Whilst there remains the emphasis on the RO as essentially a supporting role for branches, the nature of that support is more around administrative systems and general office management. A discourse of efficient use of resources exemplifies the thinking of the prototype RO. It is not based on the need for expertise in matters of industrial relations, employment law and associated issues. Nor is there any requirement to undertake representation or similar industrial work.

'Management speak' about systems and resources have been alien to union branches and are not within common narratives of union work among the traditional ROs. Yet this perception of the RO role reflects an emerging view typical of prototypical ROs and underpinned by Unison management thinking at National and Regional levels. ROs should no longer provide a 'hands on' industrial relations role but instead manage branches to meet recruitment targets. Respective examples were:

I think the key responsibilities is that the RO says what do we need to do with this particular branch given all the circumstances, what do they need to become stronger as a branch, better at recruiting, more systematic in recruiting and how the branch is organised, it is the RO who needs to lead that work.

NM2

I think the new role of the Regional Organiser is one of management. They are expected to manage a patch. The distinction has to be drawn from going in to a workplace, doing lots of casework and leading odd pockets of successful negotiations. Their job is to manage four or five branches trying to make sure that organising and organisation is improving. So they are getting more members and more stewards. My monthly one to ones with Regional Organisers is about how we turn branches to meet their recruitment targets. It is not just about recruitment activity if a branch is good at individual representation and is campaigning on issues then it will grow.

RM3

Whilst acknowledging the importance of representation, the union objective is dominated by the need 'to grow'. The type of RO required is one who not only supports branches in attaining targets but does so through a specific managerial approach. A management bias against the traditional approach to RO work was evident. One Regional Manager in interview voluntarily identified who were seen to be the good organisers in the Region all of whom were more recent recruits to organising grades and could be categorised as prototypical in their approach to RO work. This contrasted with views expressed by lay representatives who, in referring to good organisers, voluntarily identified those who had a more traditional approach. The different management perceptions of worth are determined by the extent to which

ROs accept or identify with the perceived institutional interest of the union to concentrate on recruitment and increased membership. The shift from workers' advocate towards a managerial role was engineered through the introduction of the Meeting the Organising Challenge (MtOC).

Changing the full time officer role: reinforcing the bureaucracy

As indicated above, MtOC introduced below ROs, new layers of full time staff with branch organising/recruitment roles. The gradual implementation of MtOC within 'A' Region elicited mixed views among ROs with some welcoming aspects of their changing role but also identifying consequential concerns. Working with other grades was viewed positively and for some ended an isolationist way of working:

MtOC has changed the Regional Organiser role. Traditionally I looked after branches on my own like a lone ranger approach; it is quite hard work and stressful . . . now there have been teams established and different grades contributing to the organising work . . . we have to take charge of some of the staff so are less hands on with branches and more directing traffic, however there are less of us as well which is a shame.

RO3

Some ROs were now managing small teams of staff consisting of a Local and Area Organiser. The LO role was limited to matters of supporting branches in recruitment activity while the AO in addition to recruitment work was expected to undertake low level casework and support branches in dealings with employers. Branches themselves had not expressed a requirement for such level of representational support. Given ROs were expected to be more managerial with wider remits; a void appeared in terms of Unison's ability to support members in high level casework. It was expected that more lay representatives would step into this void.

The more managerial approach to branches inevitably changes the relationship between branch and region from being based on mutual agreement on work priorities to attempted regional control of the branch. The senior management view, again revealing a bias against the traditional RO was:

We are going through a transition period at the moment and that's the problem because prior to the AO and LO appointments the role of Regional Organiser has changed. They used to be Regional Officers but the title change is significant. I suspect some of the older ones would not be happy with the change but the younger ones, newer organisers are much more willing to take up the new role.

NM1

A reluctance to embrace the managerial aspects of MtOC and assert themselves as managers of union branches was indeed present:

I think being a union organiser is about working with people and I think it's unfortunate that we use terminology like we are managing branches and we are managers that should not be what we are about. I think undoubtedly we are becoming more like managers as Unison has set itself down this path of delegating responsibilities . . . Regional Organisers are to be managers of staff and branches. It alters the relations with branches. I am not sure this is the right way.

RO5

These sentiments did find support at a senior level in Unison which only adds to an increasing sense of confusion in role expectations for the new type RO:

I don't think Regional Organisers should be expected to manage lay activists. I use the term supervise because management has too many connotations and local activists are volunteers, we do not have any management say over them. What we as full time staff are trying to do is coax more out of lay activists, trying to get more people to be active and not just passive members, and that's not management. I do think that as soon as you start throwing in the word management I think it pisses off a lot of ROs because they did not come into the union to be managers they came in to be representatives of members having formally probably been activists themselves.

NM2

However, whether as managers or supervisors, a significant element of control is expected. Ultimately the changes envisaged in the RO role by Unison management have produced a degree of scepticism and suggests an inherent resistance to change given the inevitabilities and realities of demands placed on ROs at branch level:

I don't think the key responsibilities of the Regional Organiser have changed. The intention is to change the role but I fundamentally believe the role of the RO is to support the lay activists within branch structures, through advice, training or whatever and to help them to organise. I don't see that is changing very much; being a lead, a focal point for advice, lead negotiator with employers I think that is fairly crucial. However I think these parts of the role are not what is expected from the organisation. I think it's what branches expect . . . I think now there is a real disparity between what the activist want from their RO and what the organisation wants to be doing. I think they (the national union) have broken away.

RO4

The suggestion here is that the RO will increasingly become at loggerheads with either the union branch, in the case of the prototypical approach, or union management, if the traditional type. The consequence of national union strategy both erodes traditional industrial support to branches whilst introducing a new level of support which branches do not necessarily require. For ROs the conflicting expectations of their role is exacerbated by increasingly demanding workloads due to new management responsibility and expanding the number of branches to cover as one traditional RO (RO1) explained:

I think that if you are to be on top of your game doing negotiations and representation it is very hard then to do the other bits as well. That's where the potential for confusion in the role arises because there is a lot of work involved in negotiating with employers and being on top of situations. So the management type role becomes a distraction especially when there are more branches to support.

Another traditional RO compared MtOC staffing structures with social work and teaching where front line staff found themselves managing support staff reducing time for their central function, "I think there is a danger it is mirroring assistants in teaching and social work and that it won't work" (RO5). Furthermore the changing nature of management support in Unison was seen as detrimental to the industrial work of the union that no longer held prime importance:

I would say that management has changed, you see less of them . . . you had more direct contact with your manager about what was going on in the workplace. Now it is more bureaucratic, administrative, one to ones

and targets that sort of thing. They don't look to . . . get involved in our work with branches.

RO4

The lack of support for ROs industrial work was evident regardless of characterisation. A prototypical RO, in acknowledging that the reality of dealing with branches still produced requirements for industrial support contrasting with Unison management expectations, expressed concern about the lack of support from a manager totally focused on 'organising/recruitment':

The new manager wanted to look purely at an organising agenda, but it was frustrating when you wanted advice on cases and the response was go to the solicitors, give them a call, but they have no experience in dealing directly in the workplace.

RO8

The problems of support for branches with 'rookie' ROs are compounded with similar inexperience among management which at one level is consistent with the downgrading of representation and other industrial work by Unison managers. Unison manager's positive perception of prototypical ROs will inevitably lead to the colonisation of Unison staffing structures at all levels with individuals without experience and/or regard for the importance of Unison's industrial work. The decline in industrial expertise can only result in reduced standards of representation at all levels within Unison. The consequences for retention of existing and new members are apparent in the suggestion that referral to the Union solicitors: the proposed solution negates the benefit of representation and offers no more to workers than any other legal service.

To compound the difficulties emerging from MtOC, Regional Management claims that the MtOC structure was responding to a reduction in workplace union representatives was a failure to acknowledge the mismatch in resource identification with Unison member's workplace demands of their union:

. . . if we have not got lay people on the ground doing the organising, and by that I mean talking to members and non-members, listening to what their issues are, feeding that back, helping to identify potential reps,

recruiting them, getting them on the training courses, if we did not have staff doing that we would be in an even worse position than currently as our activist base has been shrinking.

RM2

Approaching two decades of claiming to be an organising union, this admission of a serious absence of representatives suggests such claims are dubious at best: the reality is one of strategic failure to build union workplace organisation. Moreover, additional staff resources may address recruitment work or institutional priorities but fail to address the representational demands from union members. More staff in branch support roles raised issues of appropriate staffing structures and skill mix:

... there are less ROs but more organising staff in terms of AO and LOs. We are converting administrative posts and we are not replacing ROs. You can't do that forever we have to have a baseline of RO staff but we don't know what that is.

RM1

One lay representative had significant dealings with AO and LO staff and welcomed the increase in regional staff support for branches. However this response was on an assumption of such regional staff undertaking representational work within the private and voluntary sector, a problem area for the branch given the absence of facility time for representing members outside of the branch core employer:

MtOC it is about getting more staff into supporting organising and changing the RO role. I could see how the benefits of LO and AO may fill the gaps in the branch. I can see the potential for problems but I think it is good overall. It's about skill mix and support for the branch; an LO doing say email distribution lists; an AO doing Private and Voluntary sector representations.

BA1

This positive view of MtOC was based on the premise that the representational work in the private and voluntary sectors was something envisaged by Unison management as appropriate mainstream organising work but it was not management's conception of what organising work entailed (see RM2 quote above). Another lay representative

appreciated the increased support from region in terms of contributing to a local campaign:

What has been going on in our workplace is we have been having a real battle with a nasty Tory council and we have had two people assigned to our branch from Region and they have been brilliant. They are doing a great job and the general consensus is very positive.

BA4

The ability of Unison to provide this support was linked to a strategy of reducing individual labour costs so as to employ more staff in the field:

I think MtOC is ok but for some others I know they think it is a bag of shit which has not worked. I am not without sympathy for that point of view. I think we have created some lower paid jobs which are about getting into workplaces and I think that is a good thing. . . I think the RM job is becoming increasingly irrelevant or should be if MTOC worked. So you have got a chance to employ more people being in the workplace. I like that. I think it is a good thing the more people we employ the more chance we have of building the union.

RM3

Building union organisation requires more staff paid to do 'organising work' but this is distinct from representation and negotiations. What is evident is that organising work continues to be understood differently both in Unison management and among ROs. Given this tension there has been a gradual process of attempting to define what basic organising work should be and encouraging organising staff to promote such work as a priority within branches. Organising work became defined in the Joint Assessment of Branch Organisation (JABO) which although aimed at directing branch objectives and priorities by implication increased control of RO work as confirmed by a member of Regional Management

The Joint Assessment of Branch Organisation in practice

JABO required the RO and the Branch Secretary/Executive to agree objectives for the coming year for purposes of improving branch organisation (Unison 2010). Those objectives were to be monitored through ongoing review between the RO and the

branch. For Regional Management JABO was essential to building union organisation through focusing on a range of clearly defined organising objectives:

JABO: I think it has helped us enormously to refocus what we do and the things that matter. I don't think it was particularly clear before when people joined the union and later became stewards. It was a bit like the RO role in that you were appointed given a patch and left to get on with it. The RO would approach the job based on their own whim and fancy and that is how we approached branch organisation as well in that branches were left to get on with it.

RM2

And:

I think the JABO has brought us from a low base to a medium base. It has brought us on a notch. It has been key to be honest. When I was a Branch Secretary nobody told me what to do and if I had been given these goals I think it would have made things easier; that bit of guidance helps. For organising staff and speaking as a manager we just let them get on with it; but now everybody knows that at some point they have to do the JABO.

RM1

The view that ROs previously had a level of control over what they decided to do at work is not supported by either ROs or Unison branches. Nevertheless it is a view genuinely held and consistent with previously mentioned negative perceptions of union FTOs within the narrative that they were culpable to a degree for the decline in trade unionism. The reference to a previous role as Branch Secretary does not acknowledge the demands placed on that position by members and suggests that Unison Branch Secretaries are somehow awaiting instruction on how to undertake their work. What is revealing is that the objective, to give greater control to Regional Management over the work of the RO, was not stated openly in the JABO process. This view is reinforced by a second member of the RMT:

Some organisers did things one way, some didn't, some did things quite different and so I think JABO helped us focus on the basic things people could do rather than some woolly concept of organising.

RM2

Despite the prevalent view of management that Unison ROs were left to get on with what they wanted to do, no evidence to support this view emerged. Unison branches did complain about regional support when it was framed through the prism of recruitment objectives and not their own representational priorities. Nevertheless if ROs ploughed their own furrow then the introduction of JABO would go some way to introducing uniformity in approach albeit on terms preferred by Regional Management given JABO emphasises specific objectives for branches and ROs signed off by the RMT.

Although it focused the work of ROs some acknowledged the benefits of the JABO process: 'it's positive in the sense that it is useful to have some clear objectives around recruitment and communication' (RO11) and 'JABO can portray what an organised branch should look like' (RO3). Further endorsement is offered with 'JABO I personally feel in some areas it has helped improve how some branches function' (RO6). These endorsements of the process focus purely on the potential outcome for branch organisation. An alternative view of JABO expressed by other ROs is less than complimentary and includes some scathing critique:

JABO I think it's a farce. I think it measures the wrong things. It tries to hold branches to account when we have not got any sanctions anyway. I don't think it focuses on what the members see as important. Some branches are actively looking at not participating in the future and these are well organised branches; partly because they do not see that Region is a two way assessment. It is a one way assessment all on the branch. . . I think equally this links to how the organisation is very much top down, where instructions are handed down and we are not left to interpret and implement things in the best way as we see it.

RO4

Another RO underlined the importance of good representation as crucial to any organising strategy, yet this was absent from the JABO process:

I think we can't overlook how well we represent people as being a barometer to how good the union is. If we save someone's job in a workplace that is something which is noticed not just by the member but by the employer, who might think twice about how they do things in the future, and by the wider membership. So we cannot overlook representation in a retention strategy. If the report back about us is that

we are useless when it comes to the crunch that's going to have a very negative impact and therefore spending time properly representing people should be part of any organising strategy and it should not be seen simply as servicing.

RO1

This concern of relegating the key function of representation to a secondary status in union work has not gone unnoticed with lay representatives: 'I also get the impression that casework is not a priority at region, it is very much about recruitment; although they couch it as organising' (BA3). JABO over- emphasised recruitment, which was identified as organising, and representation of members was not a priority seemed to be the growing perception. Attempts at top down direction which assessed the wrong indicators and excluded consideration of representational work were significant critiques. For others whilst JABO covered the relevant indicators, the process was viewed as either unnecessary or a tick-box exercise:

For me it is another form the management have asked me to fill in, my branches tend to meet all the objectives in JABO because we focus on traditional trade union work and having a good reputation for representation in the workplace.

RO7

It is just a ticking the box exercise which I try to get it on the branch agenda so everybody is aware of what's going on and required.

RO9

The differing opinion of ROs was reflected by lay representatives. Some lay representatives saw some benefit in the process:

I have found it useful to sit down with my Regional Organiser and review how well we have done and what we need to do next year as a Branch.

BA 14

Others had mixed opinion from how to improve the process to outright concerns:

JABO is a tool. I don't think it should be used in isolation. If used properly it does break down a lot of the key elements of our work. We in our branch don't think it goes far enough. We went further and introduced mentorship of stewards linked to the duty of care a branch has to their stewards. We

developed a risk assessment for each steward, about how much casework capacity they had to deal with, what facility time was needed, relations with managers, and these sorts of things.

BA1

This branch embraced the management approach and built on what was viewed as a helpful process by acknowledging the importance of representation. However this view was in a minority with some branches expressing outright condemnation:

I am not comfortable with the union setting the branch targets and in effect putting us up in competition against each other; that is why we don't have much to do with it.

BA 18

it reminds me of New Labour target setting in the public sector, it is not about representing people, it's about following a sheet of paper which tells you what you should be doing regardless of what your members want. It's wrong it's not about why we should organise.

BA12

I feel it distracts from doing the job of representing members to the best of our ability.

BA 19

Other branches as indicated earlier bemoaned the lack of reciprocal assessment of the Region, 'I think what would be good is if the branches were interviewed about how well the region have supported the branch' (BA15). In addition the focus of JABO was predominantly about recruitment levels into the union and not trying to organise in the face of restructure and outsourcing of public services:

Recently I tried to get something going on a schools forum given all the changes that are happening. I went to see a Regional Manager about this and his reaction was you are doing alright as a branch, you are recruiting and that seemed the only focus. It does not matter what I want to do, the response is always, well everything seems alright your recruitment figures are going up. Actually we could be doing a damn sight better if he stopped and listened to what we have to say.

BA3

A similar complaint was echoed by an NHS activist:

I am familiar with the requirements of JABO and what it entails. I have my JABO assessment with the Regional Organiser. It seems to be more about recruitment as opposed to how the branch is run. I struggle because I have a full time job in the NHS and little things in which I could do with help I don't get. All it is concentrating on how many people the branch has recruited rather than how well we actually represent members. If we represent members well then our reputation gets better and people will join the union.

BA 17

Others expressed similar views criticising the emphasis on recruitment at the expense of how effective the union is in the workplace: 'JABO seems more focused on how many members we recruit rather than how the branch performs in its dealings with our employer' (BA19). The target setting suggests a process of monitoring and review in light of subsequent experience but as another RO confirms most targets are ignored with the exception of recruitment reinforcing the concern of lay representatives:

These assessments into objectives are there at the time of the annual review, but only one is observed during the year and at team meetings and that is recruitment. Which branch is doing what: it is a bit of a farce. You have to identify three objectives for the upcoming year, it is all tick box stuff it needs to be managed if it is serious but it's just another bureaucratic exercise set up by the management.

RO8

The legitimacy of the JABO process is questioned by a majority of ROs and lay representatives. It also presents a major piece of bureaucratic work for administrative staff who also question its validity in the process:

We have to arrange dozens of JABO meetings which is not always easy given constraints on availability and for what purpose is for me unclear it seems a waste of everyone's time. If it was scrapped it would make no difference to the union.

AS1

One supportive comment of JABO unwittingly confirms the prototypical ROs approach to JABO, supported by the RMT: 'Branches were left to get on with it for too long and now we have to go in and tell them what to do' (AO6). This managerialism does not sit

comfortably with ideas of grassroots issue based organising and confirms the view abroad that institutional control of organising staff and union branches is the real objective of JABO. This attempt at control is demonstrated graphically at the annual awards night and it is to this annual event that opinion was also sought.

Branch Awards

The setting of recruitment targets has inevitably produced league tables with branches in 'A' Region categorised into three groups based on the level of recruitment of members: branches that were growing; holding their own; and losing members (in effect failing branches). These categorisations, together with recruitment data for all branches, are circulated monthly across the Region. Determined purely by recruitment figures, categorisation ignores the difficult circumstances branches may face with state austerity policies producing large scale redundancies, service reorganisation and outsourcing: alternatively high levels of existing membership density limits recruitment opportunities.

Recruitment figures were the main factor used by the Regional Manager and Committee Chair to recommend Branches within the service group for nomination for awards to the Regional MORE (Member, Organisation, Recruitment and Education) committee. The winners were announced at the annual awards night. All branches in the Region are invited to attend this event joining the RMT, members of the MORE committee and staff who had worked with the nominated branches. The awards are presented by union dignitaries and have included the Union President and General Secretary.

Branch awards were viewed by some with disdain while others saw an opportunity for a social get together. For management (RM3) the awards night is an opportunity for communicating best practice and highlighting success:

I like the awards they celebrate peoples success, they give us the chance to point out what is success. There may be better ways of doing that but until we have found that out I want us to continue doing the branch of the year awards.

Another Regional Manager believed it was popular with branches:

Most branches love it; they all want to be nominated and are all clamouring to be there. They want to be the ones to meet the President. Some branches do think it's a load of nonsense but it's just a party and a thank you to branches. It is a reward and something to aim for: to be honest it's a bit of icing on the cake for branches.

RM1

This view is endorsed with one lay representative confirming: 'It is an enjoyable night, a bottle of wine, free meal and a hug from the union President' (BA17). However others expressed concerns in more considered terms whilst acknowledging the importance of identifying and sharing good practice:

I think from a trade union perspective I am uncomfortable with the awards night type event because it's almost like best supporting actor and all that kind of stuff. It is giving to a culture which may exist among employers and I question how comradely these things are if that's the right term. I just don't quite know if people want to come away wanting to emulate others and this is the best way of sharing good practice.

RO1

Another staff member went further in criticism by describing the event as an embarrassment:

I don't think the awards are a good idea, it's embarrassing. When you walk in with the branch and they are told they might be in for an award. I think it's quite patronising and misses the point because most branches feel it does not matter. Members are not ringing up branches to say I hope you win an award. They ring up to say they may lose their job and they need help.

AO1

An alternative interpretation was that the awards were:

... about creating sub divisional competition between branches and I think we should have some issues about that as we do elsewhere in for example education. I think it's very much leaning on or taking from the employer class their ways and not developing our own ways of spreading good practice.

RO1

Instilling competition between branches, and by implication organising staff, encourages a workplace culture of competition and rivalry in contrast to building collectivism and cooperation. It suggests the triumph of a popular mainstream individualist culture over traditional notions of solidarity and togetherness to the extent that the societal organisations which promoted such ideas, trade unions, have themselves succumbed to such cultural forms.

The downgrading of the importance of representation and traditional industrial work, coupled with the introduction of assessments to control both ROs and branches focus on priorities of the union bureaucracy is evident. If JABO, as far as ROs were concerned, was a subtle methodology for such purposes the later introduction of a management direction to control their daily work priorities was overt. The mask had slipped and a perverse and contradictory attempt at preventing industrial work by focusing on meetings to recruit new stewards and members was introduced.

Critical Incident two: Unison managerial prerogative, Operation Workplace

Unison regional management teams were required by the SMT to develop strategies for addressing loss of membership and subscription income that primarily stemmed from the coalition's cuts in public services. The union General Secretariat issued managers with guidance on prioritising work issues for the duration of 2013 stating:

The union's number one priority remains the protection of members' jobs, terms and conditions and the campaign for quality public services linked to an alternative economic strategy.

Unison 2013

In practice this meant a concentration on increasing recruitment levels indicated by "A key objective in delivering this priority must be the maximisation of recruitment opportunities and improvements to our organising base" (Unison 2013). There was some recognition also of the importance of retention of members. ROs were informed that:

Wherever possible, the conventional work of Organisers should be restricted to strategic negotiating meetings to protect jobs and conditions and major disciplinary cases where a member's job is at risk.

Unison 2013

This latter injunction was contrary to the previous emphasis on ROs ceding this work to branches and reinforced the importance and relevance of the 'traditional' RO.

However the centrality of institutional protection was never far from the surface. One Regional Secretary from a neighbouring region described his role as:

I do not see myself as the traditional Regional Secretary of a trade union more a Regional Director of a Corporation and the business of the Corporation is about recruitment and subscription levels. So if the membership is falling then I have a duty to inform staff of the potential consequences and to look at ways of addressing the shortfall so that we are not in a position where we have to make redundancies.

In 'A' Region the RMT response was the introduction at a regular staff conference of a plan called 'Operation Workplace' designed to address falling membership levels. Staff were shown a flip chart sheet with one word written in bold, 'LISTEN' and then informed that it was the job of all organising staff to go into workplaces and listen to workers answers to the question of what it was like to work in that hospital, local authority, university etc. All organising staff would be required to visit three workplaces a day for this purpose. Consequently the union would be more visible and available, workers would be more readily able to join the union and potential lay representatives would be identified. Absent from this programme was any acknowledgement of the role of branches and what they deemed necessary in terms of support from region. In fact neither staff nor branches had been consulted on the plan.

The objective of Operation Workplace was to get Unison organising staff into workplaces, talking to members and non-members, the primary objectives being to identify potential workplace 'leaders' and of course recruit. Follow up one to one meetings with those identified as those leaders would be arranged to commence the building of a relation with staff borrowing from relational organising approaches (Tapia

2013). All organising staff were required to complete a specifically designed form identifying each workplace visit, the number of workers listened to, the number of new recruits and new or potential representatives. These forms were then to be collated, analysed and submitted to Head Office as evidence of the delivery of the regional strategy in response to falling membership levels. Monthly returns data would also be used by team managers for use in one-to-ones and team meetings.

Experienced ROs immediately identified that the whole plan was completely impractical for a host of reasons. Its analysis of the role of ROs was severely limited. The requirement to undertake three workplace visits a day clashed with stated aforementioned national priorities of attending negotiating meetings to protect jobs and undertaking representational work at important or complex disciplinary hearings: workplace visits on this scale removed the ROs from such meetings. Workers moreover had no statutory right to attend union 'listening' meetings. The proposed scheduling took no account of the ROs inevitable work commitments arising from members raising issues, or that time was required for planning and arrangements.

It was essential to have the branch supporting such initiatives. In short a top down, highly bureaucratic and impractical proposal was tabled which undermined the requirement placed on national priority meetings, severely limited the ability of ROs to respond positively to requests for support from branches: yet was accepted at a national level as the regions response to national direction that 'something must be done' to halt the fall in membership.

The irony of the situation was not lost on some ROs, one stated in post meeting discussion:

It's alright doing three workplace visits a day I would love to but when do we deal with the issues these three visits identify, when do we do the support work the branches want, when do we manage the staff and when do we have time to think.

'Operation Workplace' , or as an RO with a dissident view put it at the time 'Operation Workload', was introduced without staff consultation, consideration of the workload

implications and no health and safety risk assessment. In consequence, the response was to turn it in to a further exercise in form filling. It was subsequently reported to staff that in the six month period to the year end of 2013 regional management had recorded staff having visited 757 workplaces, recruited 353 new members during these visits, held over 7000 conversations and identified 116 new or potential workplace leaders ('A' Region report 2013)!

Such data might suggest that the 'Operation Workplace' initiative was a resounding success. However the legitimacy of the returns is questionable. One of the administrative staff recognised that the form filling was merely a pointless exercise in which organising staff were recording both their normal activity and that of lay representatives. The subsequent take up of Unison steward training did not show any marked increase. Indeed there were no plans put in place for anticipating increased demand for steward training. 'Operation Workplace' was modified in light of experience and at a review session much debate ensued. The debate however was limited to the detail on the report form with a small minority offering critical assessment of the approach, demonstrating the lack of belief of ROs that on major issues they had little voice.

Limiting the review to questions of improving the plan and not questioning its rationale restricted legitimate criticism. One RO in conversation stating:

What is the point when you fundamentally disagree with the management telling the management that they are wrong, they have to be seen to be doing something. Form filling is a godsend for union bureaucracies; as long as they have forms to look at then they are all happy.

Whilst an exaggeration, given the genuine belief that here was a way of working to build the union, the criticism illustrates a consistent frustration arising from the belief that the views of experience were discounted and a 'management knows best' mentality prevailed. The review concluded that the work needed to be more strategic focusing on larger workplaces at the expense of smaller ones. The importance of the need for branch support for 'Operation Workplace' was belatedly recognised given staff had initiated workplace visits in some instances without prior agreement with the

Unison branch. The subsequent negative impact in branch/region relationship was acknowledged:

This resulted in problems from both perspectives e.g. branch activists feeling undermined or guilty or resentful of regional staff undertaking visits in “their” workplace without their knowledge and/or regional organising staff feeling annoyed or frustrated by lay activists not engaging in the planning or undertaking of visits in their own workplace or branch.

Unison ‘A’ Region management report 2013

However given aforementioned issues this was not easily forthcoming given other work pressures on lay representatives and the lack of conviction or belief in the process. One NHS branch secretary stated that:

I don’t know what the fucks going on at Region. We are dealing with redundancies, restructures, bullying, short staffing and they (hospital management) are trying to attack our terms and conditions and Region wants us to organise meetings to find out what is going on.

Regional management believed they knew best as to how to retain and build membership and organisation through their own internal deliberations indicated by their eventually issuing best practice guidance for branches encouraging the adoption of a process of appreciative inquiry. There was some irony to this proposal with one traditional RO pointing out that the most successful branches in terms of recruiting and winning awards ‘don’t tend to do what the management want them to do’.

Conclusion

Examination of internal union structures underpinned by sociological theories of trade unions encourages the importance of considering whose interest union strategy serves. Unison embraced concepts of managerialism from inception and the development of the union organising agenda strengthened such approaches through target setting etc. Despite professing to be an organising union, undergoing transformation in the process, there remains a lack of clarity in how union organising is defined. Different levels of Unison management at different times contradict expectations of the role of the RO and how it relates to the Unison branch. An RO can be a manager, a supervisor or a supporter of branches. This confusion stands in spite

of attempts to embed ROs work within national union priorities through the introduction of MtOC suggesting a lack of clarity and understanding of the grounded expectations of ROs by senior levels within Unison.

For Unison branches their requirement from Region is for organisational and industrial support. The ability of Region to provide this support is questionable given problems of capacity, conflicting priorities and industrial inexperience. Increasingly ROs are under pressure due to attempts to override branch workplace issues with national and regional priorities. With new responsibilities of management Unison ROs find themselves with less support for industrial work themselves, increasingly constrained in their ability to balance competing interests of the branch and region by attempts to introduce more uniform approaches to relations with branches. The tension which emerges stems from MtOC impacting on the ability of the RO to exercise judgement and discretion.

Organising work becomes a conduit through which national and regional management control the work and priorities of the RO. Rather than encouraging an orientation to organising when dealing with workplace issues, those issues were downgraded in importance with national recruitment targets now taking priority. The union institution, or more accurately, senior paid leadership, had overriding importance over the Unison branch. Resistance to these developments by ROs was interpreted as adding evidence to the narrative of the FTO being part of the problem and not the solution for union renewal. The response from ROs was mixed. It is apparent that FTOs did not act as a homogenous entity. The development of relations with branches, and their recognition of the importance of industrial support as the priority, did not confirm theories of bureaucracy in which there is a simple division between oligarchy and rank and file.

Cuts to public services impact both on Unison's membership levels and workplace priorities. Given this significant threat that the union leadership sought to acquire greater control and direction over key staff resources was understandable. Unison increased its staffing resources through MtOC but this only addressed the need to try

and increase recruitment levels. The subsequent attempts to control RO work, indirectly through JABO or directly through ill thought out management initiatives disconnected Unison from its core industrial work. As unions have the ability to undertake strategic reforms internally those reforms can have the potential for negative as well as positive consequences. Introducing 'New Labour' style targets and internal competition under the guise of organising has led to the introduction of bureaucratic systems which were meaningless for many branches and ROs. Identifying bureaucratic priorities helps to illustrate the disconnection with members at the workplace, with the failure to acknowledge the level of demand for representation from members, the reduction in workplace representatives and the deliberate reduction in staffing resources for undertaking workplace representation. Adding to an emerging crisis in this crucial area of union work, some ROs, with the support of management no longer involved themselves in direct representational work. What emerged was a dislocation between the union bureaucracy and the branch lay representative to the extent that the branch was in danger of losing the regional support it has traditionally relied upon, supplanted by a focus on efficient branch management.

Chapter 8 Recruitment and Representation

Introduction

In their examination of UK union FTOs under the heading 'organising' Kelly and Heery (1994) focus on union recruitment work. Despite the passage of time and the advent of the organising approach the conflation has continued. Union organising is still defined as recruitment activity. This chapter considers how this confusion or limitation defining organising work has become embedded: for organising read recruitment. Furthermore a significant consequence has been the downgrading of representation of union members to organising work given representation is defined as a servicing function. Initially the chapter considers how organising based on the 'organising model' was introduced into Unison and will include views from FTOs who attended and delivered the organising training for both other FTOs and lay representatives. How organising was positioned in relation to servicing is discussed in the context of the consequential effect on the key function of member representation. The confusion around questions related to defining organising work, the claim that Unison has been transformed into an organising union and the position of representation of members are all considered and then illustrated in the third critical incident, the 2013 national recruitment campaign titled 'essential cover at work'.

The Organising Model in Unison

The 'organising' element of 'new unionism' was introduced in Unison primarily by way of a training course for staff, and specifically ROs, called 'Winning the Organised Workplace' (WOW). The course was designed around the Russo and Banks (1996) Organising Model. Course content contrasted servicing and organising approaches to dealing with workplace issues and training materials included direct lifts from the Australian trade union confederation, ACTU, on organising work and how that differed from a servicing union (Unison 2001a). Crucially the course identified and connected how organising opportunities are presented by the everyday issues which emerge in workplaces.

Gradually the presentation of alternative models of trade unionism within the WOW courses became problematic on at least three counts. First was the reinforcement of the idea that organising and servicing were separate functions of union work distilled into identifiable and discrete tasks. Second, that somehow a simple strategic choice for unions existed between servicing and organising. Third it followed that servicing work was downgraded in importance and that organising work, whatever that meant, became the priority. An analysis by a member of the RMT highlighted some of the difficulty, confusion and lack of clarity in the organising message which emerged:

The Organising Model I am familiar with from WOW in the comparison between organising and servicing. There was a move towards the Organising Model. In contrast the Servicing Model about representation and case work were downgraded. However I think it has swung back to the middle as there is recognition that you cannot make that shift overnight to the Organising Model; we don't do representation, we do organising, sort your problems out yourself.

RM2

Confirming an understanding that somehow organising and servicing are separate, as opposed to alternative ways of addressing members/workers issues, Unison commenced on a journey to encourage workplace self-organisation at a time when lay representatives were decreasing in number and requiring more not less industrial support. The view that representation and individual member case work are separate to union organising work and should be devolved to branch level became dominant. This can radically alter the nature of RO work, relations between the RO and the Unison branch and more broadly the branch with the institution of Unison. These consequences were also understood by ROs to be the direction of travel for Unison inviting some strong criticism in the process (RO2):

There was this idea that you did not need to do servicing because members became self-organised, a syndicalist approach almost: which is nonsense as you need some way to crossing that transitional gap. The idea that you are suddenly going to organise a load of non-members and then not do any servicing at all strikes me as a nonsense as one of the main reasons why they become members is either because they have big issues which require negotiation, research type support or in some environments there may be a lot of individual issues.

Whilst most Unison members are employed in union recognised workplaces with procedural arrangements and facilities for union representation and activity, the focus on recruitment was neglecting the utilisation of such facilities for linking union representational work which gave unions legitimacy in the workplace. Furthermore that this strategy could produce a different type of unionism was doubtful given the objective was limited to increasing membership. Whilst syndicalist influence is referred to, that UK trade unions with more moderate traditions of orientation would adopt a deliberate strategy of union organising based on late 19th century radical anti-capitalist forms is unlikely in the extreme (see Carter et al 2000).

For some, WOW training, confirmed some relevance of the Russo and Banks organising model to their work, but nevertheless they questioned the suitability of an approach to union organising based on a different social culture, traditions and systems of industrial relations:

The Organising Model I am familiar with- as it was in the WOW course- I actually ran it. They used the American example and used videos. I found it difficult as they did not reflect the type of society Britain is. I think we have moved away from that model although we put a lot of resources in for a short period.

RO5

The WOW course was where we were shown films of people disenfranchised in the United States with no rights whatsoever taking their employer to task in particular ways that was kind of put to us as a model which we should adopt in the UK. I think there were some reservations around that because clearly our starting position was very different. Where we have recognition with employers, facilities time for representatives and procedures for dealing with workplace issues I would question how well a very aggressive organising strategy sits within that scenario. I think that probably at the time the organising model as advocated did not fit with UK circumstances.

RO1

However some ROs did take a view that WOW training helped support their way of working:

To be fair the Organising Model was of use. When I ran a WOW course you could see the light bulbs coming on among activists in relation to some of the thinking that came out of the course.

RO5

The introduction of WOW training was seen by some ROs as reinforcing existing approaches to union work supporting Kelly and Heery's (1994) contention that union full time officers were inherently enablers. Unison ROs also connected the building of union organisation to workplace issues:

I was a WOW Tutor. The principles of the Organising model were good but it was just reinforcing what a good Regional Organiser would be doing anyway. The thinking is here's an issue how I use that to strengthen the union whether recruiting, identifying stewards, negotiating agreements. It was second nature in many respects. I agree the organising model is really a way of working and approaching workplace issue by getting members involved in dealing with their own issues and not taking it from them and sorting it out.

RO4

Such evidence suggests a lack of understanding and awareness of ROs' approach to union work by national and indeed, regional management levels. The explanation may lie in the failure of the TUC and individual affiliates such as Unison to embark on any critical analysis of US and Australian organising strategies and how they would impact on UK trade union work. Consequently the narrative of the US business agent and the Australian procedural expert were applied to UK FTOs. Unlike their counterparts, UK FTOs were less remote from workplaces and supported the view that their role was to develop and enable workplace activism (Kelly and Heery 1994). Their role was not understood and a strategy based on such misunderstandings was prone to failure, worsening the position of trade unions in the process.

Representation and organising

Surveys of union members repeatedly illustrate the importance of representation to union membership. The following quote by a member of the RMT reflects the importance of that fundamental role for trade unions to represent workers. However

whilst recognising the basic role of trade unions subsequent strategy does not reflect this reality:

McDonalds makes money by selling burgers, Tesco's makes money by selling everything, Unisons job is to represent people through individual or collective representations, that is what we are about, that is what we are there for.

RM3

Given the acknowledgement of the centrality of representation of workers that this has become so contentious for Unison illustrates the problem with its organising strategy and the subsequent dilemma for FTOs. The shift to organising created a perception or belief that servicing of members is unimportant when unions are faced with the strategic choice, service or organise, which became represent or recruit. The choice of prioritising recruitment had two consequences. Firstly, with the delegation of representational work to branch level and secondly, given ROs were to emphasise organising and not servicing in their work, the requirement for industrial relations expertise for newly appointed ROs was no longer essential.

Customarily RO roles had often been central to representation outcomes whether through direct involvement in collective negotiations, individual casework or in guiding lay representatives through the procedural necessities. In addition ROs had responsibility for delivery of training on representation and often had experience of employment tribunal case work. Despite the acknowledgement of the centrality of representation to union work it was the view of regional management that this work should be undertaken by (an ever dwindling number of) workplace representatives with varying levels of competence:

Regional Organisers are more comfortable doing representation because that is what most of them do. I think everybody works in a certain way and we just have to try and change that. People who do cases and committees have the skills to go round workplaces consulting and involving people. Levels of high recruitment can be an indicator of good representation and our job as a union is to represent. The more reps we have got who are well trained the better. There are going to be more and more people wanting representation and there is therefore a need for more people in each

workplace who are going to do a good job of it. Regional Organisers cannot manage a staff, deliver a healthy branch etc. and be the best representative in the world.

RM3

The above view highlights a number of issues. Firstly that there remained a prejudicial view that ROs in Unison were stuck in a comfort zone of servicing as opposed to the reality of using representational issues to build workplace union organisation: so they needed to change. Secondly it suggests that organising was limited to talking and/or listening to members. Thirdly that whilst acknowledging the relationship between good representation and levels of union recruitment that the representation of members should be undertaken by representatives at the workplace who had received appropriate training for that purpose. This of course ignores the evidence that fewer union members were prepared to volunteer for representational duties. Given regional support for representation was now diluted, the problem of retaining lay representatives was exacerbated. Finally in acknowledging some of the issues presented by the staffing restructure, 'Meeting the Organising Challenge', the future emphasis on the role of Unison ROs was on managing staff and branches and not the centrality of representational union work.

This thinking on RO roles was flawed in its understanding of what they do and failed to acknowledge the reality of increasing complexity of workplace legal rights and falling numbers of workplace representatives as confirmed by a senior member of the national organising team:

The quality of representation is absolutely central to Unison survival. I have evidence which suggests that the number of representatives has declined over the last 10 years from 60% coverage of the workplace to 46%. The evidence is there that one out of two workplaces does not have a Unison representative.

NM1

The removal of ROs from direct representation of members to managers of staff and branches inevitably increased problems of achieving high quality representation for members and using those representational opportunities to build union workplace

organisation. It would suggest that 'Meeting the Organising Challenge' had an unintended consequence of exacerbating problems in undertaking the key basic function of a trade union to represent workers. The consequence of failure to provide quality representation was acknowledged by another senior national official:

Representation is an important factor in terms of organising because the link is - are you organised enough to ensure that people are able to be represented in the workplace? If not the reputation of the union takes a nosedive. We can meet that challenge through the number of activists we have but that has decreased so we must build that back up.

NM2

Nevertheless, as in MSF, some FTOs saw the corollary of organising work in delegation of representational work to branches. For some the idea of withdrawal from servicing work was attractive in that it took away a lot of the difficult industrial relations work. A former Branch Secretary, now an Area Organiser (AO2), confirmed how industrial support for branches was on the wane:

Organising presented an opportunity to delegate and for Regional Organisers to avoid responsibility. When I was in the Branch I found there are Regional Organisers who you took a problem to and they batted it straight back to the branch regardless. This is alright if the person has the confidence and the capability to deal with the issue. However I really think we need to be careful that in passing things back we might be in jeopardy of say bad representation, missing (employment tribunal) time limits etc.

Others also confirmed this to be the case and that in some instances this shift was given impetus by new appointees to the RO role who did not possess the industrial expertise, knowledge of employment law or the confidence to provide branches with the traditional support expected:

I remember the appointment of a Regional Organiser who had never run an individual case in her life. How that person was supposed to advise lay representatives and members on issues was amazing given that person had no industrial relations experience at any level. I used to meet with her to discuss cases because she did not know how to deal with them and I would find her in tears.

RO4.

One experienced Branch Secretary confirmed that in her time in that role:

I have seen the extremes of full time officers from those who are very supportive in terms of representing members and dealing with employers to those now who won't touch representation and are only interested in recruitment.

BA1

These views are not lost on traditional ROs:

The union has to do representation and one thing we have to be careful of is the support and advice to people. If you are not doing any representation yourself it becomes a bit difficult to advise others who have to do it. I think we see that already in some areas. I would say that the average knowledge of employment law among ROs has dropped steadily.

RO2

Another RO with a similar perspective reinforced the importance of the intrinsic link between representation and organising:

I do not believe representation is separate from organising. I think it's a different aspect of organising. It is important we do it to a good standard. We have to so we can advise based on our own experience. Representation is vital it is central to what we do. That is what members expect.

RO4

The emphasis on delegating representation to lay activists confirmed that organising in Unison was more about using staffing resources to boost recruitment and the priority of the FTO became the management of that activity. It was evident from lay representatives and FTOs interviewed that in Unison for 'organising' read 'recruitment'. Furthermore the pending crisis in representation was compounded by the view that training for representation purposes was inadequate as articulated by RO2:

I think there is now a fundamental problem which is compounded by the way we train representatives and that is the five day course because there is a problem in branches in getting five consecutive days off in facility time for training and also the content of the training has changed over the years and you now have to do about 10 days training before you get in a position

where you are equipped to a basic level of competency and be confident to represent people.

The blocks of training, initially for five days, were becoming problematic for new representatives in obtaining time-off from their employer. In addition the basic new stewards five day course formally accredited stewards as competent under the requirements of the ERA but did not provide for the level of training to achieve a competent standard. The concern over competency levels was raised by others:

I think the training in reality does not produce the level of competency required . . . we give people a certificate of attendance but that does not mean that they have done a damn thing on the course. I think the focus has to come back to competency and away from just sheer attendance on courses. I would be looking for continuing education like CPD.

RO3

For some the training course content contributes to the problem:

When I run courses I tend to ignore some of the activities. When we look at cases it's not presented in a way which is interesting . . . I incorporate change of contract into the training. I have often rewritten the courses to what is relevant to the representative.

RO4

The lack of input into the course design from experienced ROs only adds to the problems of accrediting members as representatives who may not be competent to undertake such important duties:

I think there are concerns with our training that we accredited people without actually taking them through disciplinaries we confirmed them as competent people without full training on grievance and disciplinaries and that is a fundamental flaw and it is probable that the people who designed the course did not actually have a great deal of workplace experience.

RO1

A strategy for union renewal which includes delegating representation to branches is flawed not only in failing to acknowledge the reduction in workplace representatives and complexity of casework but in failing to provide appropriate training and systems which ensure those who are accredited for such purposes are competent to do so.

Even then views persist among Unison managers that supporting people at work is undertaken as a form of resistance to Unison and not as a central trade union function:

I do think it has swung back not least because of resistance, because activists often want to help people. It is instinctively what they do - help people with their problems. Also there is a lot of hard evidence from our own membership surveys which shows that what the members want and why they join at the top of the list is representation in the workplace.

RM2

Confirmation that Unison has attempted to move away from representational work despite opposition from lay representatives suggests that those same representatives' views, and that of ROs, should be given more consideration in developing strategy and that top down approaches are flawed. The reason why workers join unions was not acknowledged as fundamental to the organising strategy. Furthermore the split between organising and servicing, whilst acknowledged as problematic at a national level, still suggests a continuation of this approach to organising work:

I think that part of the problem with the organising debate over the years is that it has been presented as an either/or thing you are either a servicing union or an organising union and actually you need to be both. It is the balance between the two which is the most important thing. Members demand a service from us. They demand to be represented when they are in trouble. However we also need to build strong workplace organisation so that some of the things that these managers are increasingly trying to do to our members on the ground are countered by building strong organisation so you have to do both. It is not either/or it is both and the presentation of the debate is wrong.

NM2

This analysis still identifies servicing and organising as separate functions and is an illustration of the mixed messages and different understandings of Unison strategy within and between levels of Unison management.

Strategic confusion

At a national level confusion over Unison's organising strategy is acknowledged, but at the same time the bases for misunderstanding is compounded:

We have always had a multi-track strategy so it's been a misconception that all we have expected branches and organisers to do is operate the organising model which was primarily issue based organising. I always recognised that we had a multi-track strategy which would also involve individual servicing. You would also have I would describe it as day to day organising and that is something I don't think we are very good at. That is walking round the workplace talking to staff, talking to our members and non-members about the union and its activities and encouraging them to become part of the union. The whole purpose of this approach is to listen to the staff to find out what their issues are and not what our issues are.

NM1

There are a number of points identified which require some comment. Firstly the role of unions is to represent working people in the workplace and beyond and this can be through encouraging activism and building union organisation or, alternatively utilising the business agent or procedural expert approach as in Australia and the United States. The organising model encouraged an orientation to the former as opposed to the latter. In the above quotation the view is that individual servicing is taken out of the orientation for organising and therefore unions can be both organising and servicing unions at different times. Further that consulting with members is a separate function from organising and finally that the issues which unions should address should originate from the workplace and not the institution. The implementation of recruitment strategies which ignore workplace membership issues undermines union organising work by making such work irrelevant if not embracing member's issues.

In 'A' region on entering the regional office an eight foot high thermometer on a cardboard background greets visitors. The thermometer level was in red marked to a point that represents the level of recruitment to Unison so far within that calendar year. The annual target is at the boiling point position. Unison staff received regular monthly updates from regional management on recruitment activity in the context of monthly targets with a commentary highlighting the top recruiting branches and conversely those that were not achieving that target. There was no contextual background provided for significant gains or losses in membership and obvious socio-economic conditions such as major redundancies through cuts in services were mainly ignored: as previously identified branches were identified as growing, staying the same

or losing members. The categories reflected a type of league table borrowed from New Labour performance management of public sector service provision, which Unison had opposed elsewhere (see Mooney et al 2007).

The lack of clarity in defining and understanding union organising, the connection between representation and organising, the position of representation as secondary in union strategy but primary for union members, all pointed to incoherence and a disconnection between constituent union parts. These criticisms were illustrated most starkly in the messages that Unison promotes in its recruitment literature. Whilst union organisers were encouraged to build activism, albeit in a way which itself divorces organising from workplace issues, Unison produces materials which militate against that work with the consistent message that Unison is 'a friend at work':

Your friend at work is often on our recruitment literature isn't it? So I don't know what type of statement that is about activism it implies you come to us rather than you sort your problems out collectively; we are the third party a friend at work.

RO1

Unison's recruitment material reinforced the view that it is a third party in the workplace, there if you have problems at work, promoting a passive union membership. In observation and participation on recruitment exercises encouragement to join Unison was not through identifying the relevance of union membership to the specific workplace but through marketing ploys such as free raffles for an iPad or television; free sweets and lollipops and at Easter time free chocolate eggs:

We reinforce the servicing aspect of the union when we recruit. We don't talk about trade unionism; we spend too much time just focusing on getting the recruitment numbers.

AO1

This view was also shared by lay representatives:

The culture is 'join the union' we have a service but nobody has a conversation that you are joining a collective organisation. The

consciousness of what a union member has is alarming there is low trade union consciousness even the training for activists reinforce that.

BA2

Whilst recruitment was readily identified as being crucial to the trade union, with survival dependent on membership income, the nature of how recruitment was undertaken had consequences. If Unison was about encouraging workers to join Unison and become active then the message transmitted to the workers should have been consistent with that key objective. How the union can make things better in the workplace through collective action and good representation and not by way of a message of join us and we will look after you, strongly implying a passive rather than active membership commitment. It was unsustainable to discuss recruitment into the union based on gimmicks which detracted from the importance of trade unions for workers in the workplace and beyond. A key opportunity to discuss the work of trade unions was lost.

What could be viewed as an internal struggle or debate around how members were viewed as passive recipients of union services or in contrast as potential contributors to building union organisation has been evident throughout the period in which organising was said to be embraced. In recent times Unison has undertaken national recruitment campaigns through advertising based on projecting the collective strength offered by trade unionism in contrast to the isolation and weakness of the lone worker. So in 2007 the UK saw the Polar Bear and the Ant campaign which offered the slogan 'If you want to be heard speak in Unison' (Unison 2007b). In 2009 a similar message was conveyed in an advertisement with the message 'one is the loneliest number: with 1.3 million members behind you join us in Unison' reinforcing the being heard in the workplace theme (Unison 2009). In both adverts collective strength was illustrated through projecting a message that union activism by the membership gets results. In addition a short video giving ten good reasons for joining Unison was produced which included, more pay, tackling discrimination, better training and safer workplaces. Promoting the membership of the union by way of collective strength and identifying how that strength has consequence for relevant workplace issues implied

the need for collective organisation at work. However the view that members should be an inherent part of organising work seemed to be lost when without any consultation with regions a new Unison recruitment campaign appeared. In 2013 the new national recruitment campaign represented a departure from that collective organisation gets results approach.

Critical Incident three: "Essential Cover at Work"

On 11th March 2013 Unison embarked on a national recruitment campaign across TV and other media outlets including online and social media sites. In a press release to launch the 2013 recruitment campaign across a range of media outlets, from national television and newspapers to local media and new social messaging networks, the Unison General Secretary stated the objective was 'to represent the tens of thousands of workers (in Unison recognised workplaces) who are currently non-members and, as such, have no defence against the government's attack on their jobs' (Unison 2013).

The message to workers was that if workers were worried about their job Unison were offering 'essential cover if you work in public services (from £1.30 a month)' (Unison 2013). The message of the campaign was framed in the classic language of 'business unionism' promoting a servicing union, with a passive membership, no encouragement to become active in the union and which placed expectations on the depleted number of workplace representatives backed by a regional staff discouraged from undertaking representational work:

We need to get the message across to members and potential members that we can provide them with the essential cover they need to help them through these tough and uncertain times. Unions came into being in tough times and it is good for people to know that they have somewhere to turn when they face losing their jobs, getting into debt, in need of legal help or just want a cheaper insurance deal. Our members have had their pay frozen for three years and any way the union can to help to save their families money is appreciated.

Unison 2013

This message was in keeping with general Unison communication to members through the Unison members' magazine 'U' (UNISON 2013d). It was dominated by services

provided to union members including, home insurance and life assurance products, health products and health care, discounted car purchase and shopping discounts. Whilst offering genuine discount and advantage for members the prominence of such services within the communication, five of the first seven pages were regularly advertisements for services, reinforced the idea of the union as a provider of services and not of a collective social organisation encouraging grassroots organisation and workplace activism. The autumn 2013 front cover reinforced the message that in hard financial time Unison could assist its members. Notably absent from the 68 pages of the magazine was any promotion of Unison workplace activism with just a few pages dedicated to workplace issues.

The message relayed to staff about the national recruitment campaign from the General Secretary was 'we're going to go out and recruit like we have never recruited before' (Unison 2013b). This was in response to what was described as "the most traumatic time in the union's history" (Unison 2013b). With an acknowledgement to previous organising claims the press release quoted an Assistant General Secretary 'What's essential is that activists lead this campaign'. However the campaign was devised and developed without activist involvement and as the press release also confirmed was as 'a consequence of extensive independent research as well as in-depth focus groups and mosaic profiling to explore what attracts or would attract people to join Unison' (Unison *ibid*). A union which claims for the past two decades to be transformed into an organising union apparently had to contract independent pollsters to find out what its membership requires. The failure of organising could not be more starkly illustrated.

"Essential Cover at work" was a message projecting the union as an insurance type organisation, reinforcing concerns of some staff and activists about the direction of the union. The union message identified a number of key services; 'advice, support and help at work; a helpline that is open until midnight; legal help for you at work and your family at home; plus a wide range of exclusive member discounts' (Unison *ibid*). The Assistant General Secretary was then quoted as saying "It's a tough environment for

unions at the moment," but "we can go out and build our union, despite the problems" (Unison *ibid*). The problem was that the message was not about building the union but projecting a service for individual workers. In the staff briefings comparison was made with union subscriptions of other unions which demonstrated that at certain income levels being a member of Unison was significantly cheaper which in these times of austerity could have significance in choice of union: the strong inference was the potential for poaching of other union members. Nor was this message a sudden departure from the position of the union, rather it confirmed a direction about which a number of lay representatives had expressed previous concern:

I have a problem with the way we recruit. In the past few years they (Unison) have wanted us to become more like insurance salesmen. Sometimes I feel we are just to sell the insurance policy of the union or getting members to join on the basis of a free holiday in Devon. This is not how I see it should be. I would like people to join our union because they see we are a proper union who represent and talk to the gaffers negotiating on members behalf. Workers should be running to find us wanting to join because they have heard that we are fantastic and it's how we promote ourselves getting people to join us by the example we set and the way we represent.

BA5

This lay representative clearly identified that not only was recruitment crucial to Unison, given survival is dependent on membership income, but the nature of how recruitment is undertaken has consequences. If Unison was about encouraging workers to join and become active then the message which was transmitted to the workers should be consistent with that key objective. It should be about how the union can make things better in the workplace through collective action and good representation not a message of 'join us and we will look after you' strongly implying a passivity rather than active membership commitment. One Unison Branch Secretary reported coming into some criticism from another union lay representative, who comparing the national campaign with Unison's more robust organisation and challenging of management at a local level stated, 'Is Unison now just an Insurance Company for workers if they have problems at work?; That's not how you work in this

hospital'. Yet not all senior officials subscribed to the recruitment is organising position:

I have discussions with lots of people about what is organising. At a recent senior meeting of the union you can have a big table of people and ask that very question . . . and everybody around the table will give you a different answer. My view about what an organising union is that every single part of the union and every single member of staff, regardless of whether you have got organising in your title, should be able to play some role in supporting our branches to build strong organisation on the ground and all of this is different to recruitment.

NM2

Unison also identified as a new initiative was the introduction of a specific legal helpline for Unison activists:

UNISON is launching a legal helpline to assist hard-pressed activists needing urgent legal advice. The helpline will launch on 1 May and has been set up in response to feedback from UNISON activists. It aims to provide urgent initial legal help on employment matters. Launching the helpline, General Secretary Dave Prentis said: 'Our activists are working hard to look after our members and this government is set on making their lives harder. Activists told us they needed access to quick legal advice and this is what the helpline aims to provide'. The helpline will be monitored and reviewed to make sure the service it is providing is an effective and efficient service.

Unison 2013c

This initiative was introduced without any consultation with staff and from an RO perspective was viewed as further evidence of an undermining of their position. The helpline had developed as a response to criticism from lay representatives over reduction in FTO support at a time when such support was increasingly required in response to the consequences of government austerity measures. A press release as part of the campaign referred to public services being under unprecedented attack from Government. The General Secretary is quoted as saying "It is a tragedy that in 2011 270,000 jobs were axed in the public sector and that figure is predicted to rise to 1.2m by 2017/18" (Unison 2013). In bypassing ROs, and abstracting legal issues from

the wider relations at the workplace, it was quite possible that organising opportunities were overlooked.

The initial results of the campaign were deemed to be a success with record levels of recruitment. Unison staff were required to vacate their day jobs to be allocated into supporting workplace recruitment events and in doing so reinforced the servicing message of the essential cover programme. The General Secretary reinforced the dominant and limited aim of the initiative when stating:

It's been a great two weeks . . . I'm so proud of all our members, activists and staff who have been out there telling non-members about the essential cover UNISON provides . . . the more members we have, the stronger our voice becomes. So it's vital that we carry on recruiting . . . A massive thanks to you all for helping to make our spring recruitment drive such a great success. . . Our membership records show that in the first week of the campaign (from 11 March); we recruited 4,202 members – a 63 per cent increase compared to the same week last year. . . In the second week (from 18 March), we recruited 3,456 members – up 36 per cent on the same week last year . . . This is a fantastic tribute to all your hard work. I believe it shows that we can recruit – even in these hard times. And I know that we must, if we are to build a strong union that can support all our members . . . This won't be a one-off campaign. Let's keep on building our union.

Unison 2013

Given that organising teams were required to dedicate several weeks in the year to team recruitment sessions, the additional national recruitment weeks reinforced the perception that with ongoing cuts to public services and the consequential impact on union membership levels, the rationale for recruitment was for protecting the institution. Theories of oligarchy and bureaucracy are of particular relevance for understanding this perspective and at times of crisis oligarchic and bureaucratic interests become more prominent. This prominence was manifested by the staff member who saw the purpose of recruitment as keeping staff in jobs. The pursuit of the interests of the representatives over those of the represented explicitly expressed the idea of the legitimacy of institutional domination over the lay membership despite the espousal of democracy within the union rule book (e.g. see Webb and Webb 1894, Michels 1962). This position was also reflected at a staff conference on Unison finances

at which a member of head office announced that Unison were considering that future strategic approaches could be determined by their contributions to income generation. However, countering this finance driven approach, the 'A' Region RMT recognising the level of complaints over standards of representation was reaching unacceptable levels acknowledged that action needed to be taken to address the position. The predictable representational crisis emerging resulted in the request for a small team of traditional ROs to review the position and make recommendations.

Conclusion

Trade union organising strategies have resulted in the representation of members being downgraded as recruitment of new members in existing workplaces becomes the priority. Given this approach the idea that trade unions are still 'circling the wagons' in defensive mode is apparent. Unison initially embraced the approach to union work espoused through the 'organising model' of using organising orientation to address workplace issues and grievances. However, over time, as elsewhere, organising and servicing became defined as separate functions raising questions of strategic choice for Unison. Representational work became seen as a function primarily the remit of lay representatives and not ROs.

The 'organising model' ceased to influence Unison practice to any great degree. This despite the fact that ROs confirmed that, whilst elements of the approach were not appropriate to the different systems and culture of the UK, the orientation to organising around workplace based issues had some relevance to their own approach to union work. Although the centrality of representation of members was acknowledged by national and regional Unison management, it was displaced as a priority of ROs by that of recruitment targets. Industrial support for branches has been weakened, through MtOC structures, appointments to the RO posts of candidates with limited industrial experience, and faced with new managerial responsibilities and demands for dedicated recruitment focused activity. Furthermore the challenges of delegation of representational work to lay representatives have not been addressed with criticism that Unison training is inadequate. Workers join unions primarily for

protection at work and the choices taken by Unison undermine the union's ability to provide that protection either through skilled representation or the power of a strongly organised workplace collective.

Claims that Unison has been transformed have some legitimacy. However the promise of union transformation through the radical direction of building workplace activism and collective power espoused within the 'organising model' has failed to materialise. With performance management targets based on recruitment levels, the promotion of Unison as a third party in the workplace and general recruitment activity which has an absence of any narrative around power and solidarity principles, the type of trade unionism promoted is reminiscent of 1980's 'new realism' and a limited form of business unionism.

Not only did the recruitment strategy fail, the neglect of support for workplace representation has led to increased complaints by union members and evident dissatisfaction with regional support at branch level. Whilst 'A' region to its credit recognised these issues it was at a national level that some acknowledgement was required to alter a direction of travel that looked increasingly ill-suited for the challenges posed by an incoming Conservative government hostile to public sector investment.

Chapter Nine: Analysis

Introduction

Previous chapters centred on Unison threw up a number of issues regarding its practice. Interviews with ROs, Unison managers and branch activists revealed a disconnection between organising strategies and the priorities for Unison members and branches. Those strategies were formed in isolation from activists, detached from day to day problems and enforced by managerialism. Consequently recruitment targets gained prominence over the representational demands of members with significant implications both for the RO role and Unison more generally. These findings were reinforced and extended by the case studies of critical incidents that highlighted three areas of concern: i) organising strategies were largely irrelevant to industrial work; ii) Unison management had nevertheless introduced systems of objective setting and monitoring to prioritise organising over representational work; iii) despite proclamations of being an organising union Unison was still promoting Unison membership as one of buying trade union services. In this chapter these issues and concerns are examined within the context of 'new unionism' as set out in chapter two and the reality of trade unions as social institutions with competing interests as referred to in chapter three.

As indicated earlier, FTOs are defined as much by what they do as their employment titles. In trade union analyses (see chapter three), FTOs were variously characterised as: flexible pragmatists balancing the immediate interests of the membership against longer term institutional interests and the maintenance of orderly industrial relations; intermediaries between capital and labour, although employed by the latter; agents of capital, incorporated into the capitalist class through their position. Michels (1962), on the other hand, maintained that they inevitably became part of a powerful oligarchy whose interest were separate to that of the union membership, exercising control over that membership as part of a wider bureaucracy. It is these dimensions of the FTO role, what they do and what they are, which require analysis in the context of the impact of organising strategies.

This chapter commences by revisiting the role of the FTO in the context of Unisons organising strategy and objectives and their relevance to the workplace. Consideration of the role of Unison management, in a context of consistent failure to meet organising objectives, is made. One of the consequences of such failure is the attempt to control the work of Unison ROs. Resistance to such control and how this relates to theories of rank and filism, bureaucracy and oligarchy is discussed. The implications for strategy, the role of the Unison full time officer and the evident structural disconnection between organising and industrial work is considered. The chapter also revisits debates around the merits of servicing and organising and how, in the context of contesting changing roles and priorities of ROs, elements of a pending crisis in union representation emerged. A related consideration is the decentralisation of public services, in theory presenting opportunities for union renewal through decision making being closer or at the workplace, in reality decentralisation presented major challenges to public sector unions. Finally the chapter will examine the claim that Unison organising strategy has resulted in a transformed union.

The Regional Organiser and Unison's organising strategy

Since Unison's inception senior managers and national committees pronounced on recruitment targets assuming it would automatically follow that national objectives become *the* priority throughout Unison. However such deliberations were made without membership or activist engagement (Waddington and Kerr 2000). The failure to achieve recruitment targets of 1.5 million set in the NRP and the 2 million in NORS questions both the realism of the targets and relevance of the strategy. From the outset Unison's organising strategy was framed by a paper exercise around branch development plans monitored through regional and national committees (see Waddington and Kerr *ibid*). Their relevance can be measured by the belief of some ROs that the abandonment of such plans would have no impact on recruitment levels or the ability to represent members effectively and would not impact on the strength of union workplace organisation. It would however question the rationale for significant elements of work of some regional and national Unison committees.

Unions national recruitment strategy was revised and developed in the context of the organising element of the TUC New Unionism relaunch. At that time Unison's main organising sector of Local Government had experienced a significant fall in membership density, from 78% density in 1979 to 46% by 1995. This is only partly explained through an exodus of blue collar membership where local dominance of white collar activists in the new union's structures emerged (see Waddington and Kerr 1999). The decline points to a level of union ineffectiveness pre and post Unison formation in which lessons went unheeded. This fall in density figures illustrates that it is not just structural factors but how unions respond to them that is important.

The embracing of the organising model through WOW and Bee Active courses for staff and lay representatives, which encouraged addressing workplace issues in an 'organising way,' was abandoned over time with the emergence of a position influenced by the narrative that unions had a strategic choice, either service or organise members (itself interpreted as a limited and simplistic recruitment sense). This position borrowed from US and Australian trade union confederations assumed workplace representation would be covered to a similar standard by training lay representatives to undertake work formerly the remit of FTOs. This view of organising fitted with the attempt at delegation of representational responsibilities to lay representatives at branch level following the reduction in FTO posts after merger (Waddington and Kerr 1999). Organising became partly defined by the level at which union representation was undertaken. It was servicing when a RO represents a member whilst the same function was organising when undertaken by a lay representative (Waddington and Kerr 2000). This transition was also consistent with the narrative of the need for ROs to change from servicers to organisers of the union membership.

Earlier research into FTOs (see Chapter Two) identified their main responsibilities as collective and individual representation through workplace negotiations, defending union members at disciplinary hearings and supporting grievances through internal employer procedures. The development of organising strategies has seen this work

become defined as servicing. Other responsibilities included recruitment of new members and developing lay representatives in their union work and are now considered organising work. Traditional Unison ROs confirmed their practice had been to support and enable lay representatives and members to greater self-reliance through improving workplace organisation on the back of workplace issues, consistent with Kelly and Heery's (1994) findings. However these same ROs were viewed as the wrong type by Unison management given they did not operate in the expected organisational way of managing branches, delegating representational work and prioritising recruitment activities.

The introduction of MtOC staffing structures developing from Unisons organising strategy extended managerial responsibilities by consolidating the RO into a new layer of Unison management primarily engaged in managing other staff to work towards achieving nationally set recruitment targets, the key priority of Unison. The expansion in organising staff through AO and LO grades led to a reduction in the number of ROs who now had increased areas of industrial responsibility, in addition to their managerial duties. Whilst regional staff resource for branch support was increased that support was geared to national union priorities and not those of Unison branches.

Some ROs viewed organising, as introduced and defined through WOW training, as building on existing practice suggesting some confirmation of previous findings of Kelly and Heery (1994) that generally trade union officers in the UK were enablers. It follows that unfavourably comparing UK full time union officers contribution to the work of the union with that of their US and Australian equivalents was mistaken (Unison 2001b)). The subsequent organising strategy based on an incorrect assessment of the key role of the FTO, was flawed. In Unison however the narrative of the FTO being part of the problem gave an added impetus to support for an open recruitment policy of new ROs.

The view that outsiders were required for invigorating new ideas and ways of working demonstrates the influence of US unions and specifically the SEIU (see chapter two). This recruitment, coupled with a staff career development path to organising work, has

produced a collective deterioration in industrial relations experience among ROs creating problems of legitimacy with both members and employers. Conversely the traditional autonomy of ROs was constrained through requirements to focus on general recruitment activity which became *the* organising strategy. ROs were expected to manage both staff and branch lay representatives fixed facility time for Unison, transforming them from workers advocate to union manager/agent.

The changing nature of the RO role and the recruitment of staff with minimal industrial experience, but apparently more attune to the national union strategy and the managerial responsibility now associated with the RO role, further reduced industrial support for lay representatives, while potentially enhancing capacity for organising/recruitment. These shifts in staff composition and priorities led to problems in both capacity and ability to perform union representational work. Traditional ROs acknowledged resistance to such changes and highlighted the continued importance of dealing competently with branch workplace issues for the vitality and effectiveness of Unison: a contention supported by recent research by the ETUC that confirmed retention of union membership is largely due to the role played by union representatives at the workplace (Waddington 2014).

Furthermore with the Australian experience, where by 2000, after seven years of delegating representation, the effect on union membership was to create more non-unionists than unionists in public sector workplace suggests such strategy is questionable (see Bowden 2009). However no critical assessment of why Unison embraced US and Australian organising approaches has been made. Nor has there been any fundamental review of the impact on Unison at the workplace in terms of power and influence. The 'cover at work' campaign (see Chapter Eight) identifies a possible change in strategic direction, albeit a reversal to the failed consumer unionism strategy as a workplace service provider.

Where union organising has been successful it is through comprehensive and concerted adoption of organising orientations and techniques (see Bronfenbrenner et al 1998). Unison, similar to unions in the US and Australia, has not been prepared to

adopt such approaches This reluctance suggests that even were evidence of organising success can be identified, internal resistance to radical change prevails.

Comprehensive organising approaches entail switching of resources from the centre, decentralising power, strategic targeting of sectors or occupational groups and using workplace issues to build union organisation. Such steps can be seen as a threat to existing union positions at a national and local level and in constituencies traditionally separated by definition as bureaucracy and rank and file.

Unison management, control and resistance

During merger talks the partner unions involved Cranfield School of Management in their deliberations on how the new union would operate. This relationship was to develop in subsequent years (Dempsey 2000). Managerial thinking was influential and led to the identification of several critical success factors for the new union. Within this context an aspiration for greater managerial control of staff was identified (Dempsey2000). Given the size of the then new union, expressions of clarity in relation to organisational focus, purpose and consistency was understandable. However there was an inbuilt assumption that such objectives set at a national level would coincide with membership priorities.

A difficulty which any large general union faces comes from the size of its membership with its range across sectors and occupations. In any case trade union structures are built upon a number of component parts with varied interests and priorities and are often resistant to change. The ensuing challenge to gain support for change requires consultation, explanation and consideration of potential opposition. Such steps were of particular relevance with the organising model approach. Carter (2000:133) notes 'A model which is premised on debate and involvement cannot be successfully introduced without discussion, over the heads of members, representatives and officers'. This referred to MSF but could have readily applied to Unison and is consistent with experience in SEIU (see McAlevey 2012).

The potential for opposition to emerge is exacerbated when top down directive in a 'member-led' union, which included criticism of FTOs, is exercised. The introduction of

the organising model undermined the principles it promoted. Carter (2000) examining how organising came to MSF observed that 'bureaucratically initiated change has definite limitations, especially where change is designed to increase participation'. In Unison the promotion of participation is in democratic structures which are increasingly characterised by internal bureaucratic tendencies.

Where a national strategy could work is through identifying broader issues, common across workplace and occupational sectors, and a focus on union orientation where regardless of the varied issues of the day, addressing them is undertaken around principles of encouraging workplace activism. Despite the promise of the development of such grassroots based unionism through various pronouncements and the introduction of WOW training it was recruitment targets that became the objective and recruitment activity the strategy. To realise this strategy the need to establish control of union work, and specifically that of the RO was required.

Control was achieved either through the acquiescence of ROs or constraining others through a combination of the structures of MtOC, the methodology of JABO and other managerial initiatives. Within MtOC RO industrial support was diluted in two ways, firstly through an increase in the number of branch responsibilities and secondly in the additional responsibility of managing a small team of Area and Local Organisers. JABO attempted to hone the work of the RO and prioritise the work of Unison Branch Committees to the objectives set within JABO. However whilst this also contributes to the internal bureaucratic proceedings of Unison it did not have any significance in the day to day activity of the Unison branch. The introduction of 'Operation Workplace' suggested the heightening of attempts at workplace control through a system of micro-management.

ROs were also directed to support regional and national recruitment weeks. On five occasions a year organising staff blocked out diaries to undertake a whole week of recruitment within a specific geographical area. A three line whip operated and ROs were discouraged from dealing with issues within their specific area of branch responsibility. The ensuing problems around supporting their branches were

aggravated with national recruitment campaigns such as 'Essential Cover at Work' which required two additional weeks of similar recruitment focus in total reducing capacity for ROs to support branches by as much as 20% within a year.

Where a Unison branch required an RO to undertake representation a national instruction required the branch to make application to the relevant Regional Manager for permission to do so, removing the autonomy of the RO in such decision making, and in the process, reducing their authority before the lay membership. Involvement in case work was discouraged as it was seen as an obstacle to developing union organisation. Consequently there was no analysis as to the merits of or opportunities for improving union organisation through specific case work development. ROs who were ready to undertake case work were viewed as not prioritising work appropriately and were therefore not good organisers. This perspective on union work encouraged some ROs to, in effect, abdicate from representational responsibilities. This fitted comfortably with some newer appointments to the RO role who were able to focus on the one objective of meeting recruitment targets, an approach supported by Unison management.

Regardless of the approach of their allocated RO Unison branches still required support and advice on matters of industrial representation. When the inexperienced RO was called upon to provide that support the consequences could be negative for the RO, the member or members involved and the reputation of the union. The increasing lack of expertise was compounded in two ways. Firstly the absence of opportunities within management systems for ROs to discuss the industrial issues of the day restricted the chances of less experienced staff to learn from their experienced peers. Secondly the issue of lack of industrial experience was replicated further up the line. Traditionally ROs could defer to their own line manager for advice on problematic industrial issues or organisational quandaries. Unison management were themselves increasingly less experienced or knowledgeable in such matters.

Regional Managers are appointed without appropriate consideration for their industrial experience and expertise. For staff recruited for campaigning as opposed to

industrial experience lack of knowledge of more senior staff on industrial issues exacerbated the problem of providing support to branches. Traditional ROs focusing on supporting lay representatives and members in dealing with their priorities were welcomed by the Unison branch. However as this support was outside of national objectives and in effect were acts of resistance to management direction, such ROs were deemed to be not of the right type.

Bureaucratic disconnection

Problems of industrial support and representational capacity were exacerbated by Unison's structure. Attempts to encourage membership participation through its range of internal committees and self-organised groups distracted from the workplace and offered a union activism embedded in a culture of internally focused lay bureaucracy. Senior lay representatives legitimised national plans, strategies and targets and readily acquiesced in the JABO assessment process by attending JABO interviews with branches, accompanying the relevant regional manager. In doing so becoming embedded in the bureaucracy of JABO assessment in the process and positioning themselves contrary to the dominant view of other lay representatives. Unison's own internal structures provided for a career path in a particular kind of trade union activism adding texture to Hymans (1989) contention that there is a tendency for lay union representatives to themselves become bureaucratised.

For many lay representatives and ROs JABO was a tick box bureaucratic exercise disconnected from the industrial work in the branch. Yet regional management viewed JABO as central to the unions organising work. Lay representatives also criticised JABO for mimicking techniques of new public management and New Labour target setting with league tables for recruitment putting branches in competition with each other. This perspective was reinforced through the awards night which, whilst claiming to be an opportunity to share best practice, branches were set apart from each other through the process of nomination for, and allocation of, awards.

As for the view portrayed of the FTO as the union bureaucrat, evidence from Unison questions such theory that union structures both create and preserve a uniform,

conservative full time officer bureaucracy prompting in return challenges from a more radical lay rank and file membership (see Pearce 1959, Cohen 2006) on two counts. Firstly, the support of some lay representatives for institutional priorities of Unison and managerial initiatives to control and manage both their peers and Regional Organisers, confirmed an unintended consequence of one of the founding objectives of Unison, establishing an exceptional trade union democracy, had in effect created a robust bureaucracy. Whilst opportunities for rank and file union members to participate in Unison were plentiful, the grasping of those opportunities can convert the new activist into the lay bureaucrat focusing on the institutional mechanisms of the union organisation as opposed to building union power at the workplace. Secondly resistance to a way of working which emphasised national and regional priorities over those of the grassroots membership came as much from ROs themselves recognising the folly of such strategy.

Whilst this strategy gave Unison branches greater responsibility for matters of representation the impetus to undertake recruitment work also increased. Regional management encouraged ROs to see the resource of employer granted fixed facility time for lay representatives as an opportunity for management of lay representative's facility time. However freed from normal workplace management controls with the attraction of union representative roles, it was unlikely that representatives would allow subjugation to control of their time by Unison Region. The view that fixed facility time was for Unison to manage was disconnected from the reality of facility time being provided at the employer's behest in order to improve or maintain effective industrial relations.

Disconnection from the grassroots membership was manifested in other ways. The promotion of employer partnership agreements saw a trade-off with employers which in obtaining enhanced facility time for participation in Unison resulted in lay representatives becoming junior partners in change management agendas, as observed elsewhere by McIlroy (2000). This in itself created a position in which ROs acquiesced with or challenged these arrangements. The latter option was made more

difficult given such arrangements were supported by Unison management. This was a feature in which, more broadly, branches reported positive relationships with ROs, but made a distinction between those ROs and the Unison region. In addition some branches complained that whilst they were being assessed by region there was no reciprocal arrangement for branches to assess regional support given a significant variation in RO standards and approach to industrial support.

Several lay representatives complained that ROs ignored branch requests for advice and support on matters of representation, were generally difficult to contact on these issues but were more ready to get involved in recruitment activity. This created a disconnection both in agreeing priorities and crucially industrial support for Unison branches. This contrasted with the position of traditional ROs and branches where the readiness to take on difficult casework, or work in the private and voluntary sector where there was no union recognition and consequently no lay representatives cemented good relations between branch and the RO.

Implications for the quality and consistency of representation of members are apparent with lay representatives, and ROs, questioning the ability of some in the newer intake to provide appropriate support, let alone undertake representation. Consequently branches, and more crucially members, were faced with a lottery in terms of RO allocation. For branches this was more acute when a frequent turnover in branch allocation of ROs was experienced; although this only heightened awareness of inconsistencies in standards and approach to industrial work. The introduction of a legal helpline for Unison representatives suggested the disconnection in industrial support was acknowledged at a national level. However in bypassing the RO and undermining their traditional industrial role in the process Unison was also providing a further potential disconnection of workplace organising issues from organising staff.

This disconnection is reflected in recruitment activity undertaken isolated from workplace issues and questions of rebalancing power relations at the workplace. As such organising strategy in Unison falls into the narrative of opponents of trade unionism who not only maintain that trade unions are limited in the sectional interest

of their members but are primarily concerned with the organisations own self-interest (Michels 1962). This contrasts with the commitment of ROs focused on supporting members and lay representatives on their real issues continuing to work in a modus operandus recognisable as the enabling full time officer.

Representation an emergent crisis

Trade Unions depend on workers joining, paying membership subscriptions for their survival; simply put - no members, no union. Representation of workers is the business of the union, undertaken at levels within the workplace and beyond through civil courts, employment tribunals and as an interest group for working people within a pluralist democracy. On this latter point trade unions make representations to and can be sought their view from governments, employers, NGO's and other quasi-official bodies. For organising strategies to be effective there has to be a link between why trade unions exist and trade union activity at the workplace. This crucial point seemed to have been lost in Unison's organising strategy.

Grassroots workplace organising was introduced in Unison through focusing on addressing workplace issues consistent with the 'organising model'. However Chapter Six identified that later a shift in the meaning of 'organising' became apparent. The workplace issues focus was abandoned as organising became defined almost exclusively as recruitment, downgrading the importance of representation in the process. Recruitment and representation became separate functions of trade union work. This division occurred in the face of a trend in workplaces from the 1970s onwards for the increased use of procedures to resolve disputes and the growth in individual employment rights. With constraints on collective action a workplace culture was created giving prominence to individual rights increasing demand from workers for trade union representation on an individual basis. The challenge for trade unions was not only in defending and/or asserting those individual rights but in developing collective responses to the workplace issues which manifest themselves as individual grievances; in doing so, developing consciousness beyond the individual to the collective: a step to more critical thinking about power relations in the workplace and

society more generally. With the separation of representation from organising work, however defined, it is apparent that Unison, and other trade unions, have not considered this reality in their development of strategies for union renewal.

Yet workplace representation presents opportunities for developing trade union work through an organising as opposed to a servicing orientation. In other words workers have issues at work, the trade union exists to represent workers in connection with those issues and the representation can be undertaken in a way which builds union workplace organisation. With a perspective that unions had a strategic choice between organising or servicing members, Unison denied the possibility of integrating both. If the objective of national strategy was to build union organisation and renew then recruitment is one of the key tactics towards that objective. However the objective would appear to have been supplanted by one of the tactics and representing workers was increasingly marginalised within both the narrative of what is important and in the priority of ROs work. Furthermore some ROs, either chose, or were not required, to engage with members and lay representatives on matters of representation.

Organising work became a means in itself, as a separate function of trade union staff, disconnected from workplace issues. Dealing with workplace issues is prominent in both servicing and organising models yet Unison's practice downgraded its importance regardless of orientation.

The shift from organising collectively to individual recruitment was reflected in national recruitment strategies. Previously these had emphasised the importance of a collective voice in the workplace, integral to organising principles. However this approach was jettisoned in favour of an unashamedly service based recruitment message to workers. The 'essential cover at work' campaign emphasized the servicing function of Unison reinforcing the view of the union members as passive, not active, and the union as a third party there to look after its members in the workplace. This message is not only received by potential new members but longstanding existing Unison members also. The theme completely contradicts organising work, undermining efforts of both staff and lay representatives attempting to foster a

collective mentality among members and building union organisation on that basis. Yet whilst the campaign emphasised the importance of workplace support, Unions own strategy was diluting that same workplace support and failing to address existing workplace demands.

For traditional ROs representation at work was crucial to the vitality of the union. It complemented organising work by building a good reputation at the workplace based on the positive outcomes of representation, both individual and collective. The debate around level of representation misses the point on two counts; firstly whoever undertakes the representation that function needs to have legitimacy and secondly the approach to representation needs to be based not only on resolving the issue(s) satisfactorily but also improving union workplace organisation. The acceptance by Unison management that R representation was servicing and branch representation was organising puts definitions and debates about organising in a perverse position. Whilst conceding that union reputation was enhanced through effective representation of member's, boosting recruitment in the process, Unison's strategy of downgrading the importance of representation and devolving it to branches contradicted this stance by insisting that ROs undertook new duties of managing staff and working towards recruitment targets.

Such thinking ignored the reality that workplace procedures for consultation and dispute resolution remain a feature of contemporary industrial relations with increased individual and collective rights for workers. The number of competent workplace Unison representatives has decreased (Darlington 2010) consistent with reported shrinkage in workplace representatives across the UK. This is evidence of the broader failure of new unionism to instil and reinvigorate workplace union activism. The reduction in lay workplace representatives, the intensification of their work and reported limitations on facility time, would suggest that increases in staffing at regional levels should be made to address these challenging developments. However Unison strategy dilutes industrial support from the region and simultaneously delegates more responsibility to the Unison branch. Unsurprisingly this strategy failed

with an explosion of complaints over both failures and standards of individual and collective representation (Unison 2015).

The downgrading of representation subverted by the priority of meeting recruitment targets provides evidence of the immediate institutional interest overriding that of the union membership. With the failure to link organising work to workplace issues organising work became an isolated process, divorced from the reality of workplace conflict and struggle. In such circumstances the prospects of using workplace issues to build union organisation and encourage membership activism was remote. Moreover, for some the overt purpose of recruiting new members – the preserving staff jobs within Unison - becomes an acceptable rationale, illustrating how the interest of the representatives usurp those of the represented, as Michels (1962) and Webb and Webb (1894) cautioned. This stance contrasts with the approach of ROs who saw a morality in union recruitment aimed at the addressing of workplace issues and terms and conditions of employment and their attendant inequity and injustice. It is this latter position which provides for a glint of optimism that a refocus on the importance of representation at all levels is possible to reverse the ongoing tide of decline.

Union transformation

Examination of union bureaucracy helps explain how a strategy with radical potential becomes distorted and a vehicle for conservative goals. Transformation to an organising union requires clarity in objective, understood and supported by union constituent parts. Imposing a top-down organising strategy without clear objectives and failing to link workplace organising to broader industrial and political objectives dooms that strategy to failure. The question of union objectives posed by Simms and Holgate (2010) is highly relevant given the lack of discussion, debate and projection of a future union vision. Early proclamations of building workers power seem over optimistic at best. Limiting the subsequent focus to workplaces further lowered the likelihood of success by ignoring the need for a broader coherent political and industrial strategy. Union objectives became limited to increasing recruitment rates.

Yet the embracing of organising by US unions led to claims that such unions were in a process of transformation from business unionism to social movement unionism.

Internal to unions, several developments pointed to such transformation. These included strategic targeting of organising campaigns, shifting finances and staff resources to organising, redesigning representative training courses, decentralising union internal decision making, developing a coherent and consistent message through union communications and the adoption of comprehensive organising techniques (see chapter two). The dominant narrative that trade unions spent too much time and resources on servicing members and that FTOs needed to change their focus, essential if unions were to transform, prevailed. In the case of Unison, according to Waddington and Kerr (2009), transformation to an organising union was achieved. However general recruitment campaigns, labelled organising, do not justify such claims. Rather than decentralising, the movement was to a more centralised organisation, controlling staff and lay representatives to ensure their working towards recruitment targets.

Assessment of the extent of transformation can also be assessed by degree of structural change, industrial relations approaches, and union objectives and orientation. Unison's structure remained focused on single employers in local authorities, NHS Trusts and Universities. The problems associated with the failure to address internal structures at the time of merger remained. The motivation for merger - the aspiration to meet the challenges of privatisation, outsourcing and forms of new public management in general - seemed to have been set aside and replaced by a priority of consolidating membership in traditional employers, despite findings in one survey that 10% of membership leaving Unison did so due to loss of recognition (Waddington and Kerr 2000). This traditional focus may have had some merit in the sense of concentrating building union organisation where some form of union influence existed. Nevertheless it abandoned members going to privatised workplaces as a secondary consideration and failed to convert threats of privatisation into organising opportunities. Whilst some ROs confirmed the position outlined by Bowden

(2009) that union organisation comes from the ability to regulate occupational labour markets, in certain conditions, such as EDC (see Chapter Six), the privatisation threat can be turned into an opportunity for union building.

The structural disengagement from the realities of union workplaces identified by Foster and Scott (1997), and referred to in Chapter Five, was heightened in the experience of long standing ROs and lay representatives. Attempts at increasing managerial control of RO work responsibilities reinforced perceptions of disengagement. Promoting union organising through the encouragement of member activism by the introduction of the national recruitment campaign 'essential cover at work' was a glaring contradiction, inconsistent with claims to be an organising union. This latter recruitment campaign was consistent with the persistent message to new members that Unison was 'the friend at work'.

Union transformation through a significant shift in resources and orientation did not occur and the proposition that new public management more generally leads to union renewal was not supported. The simple logic prevails that the bigger the workplace the greater the propensity for collectivism. The experience of ROs confirmed that the breakup of existing services producing a growing multiplicity of providers of public services presented a considerable challenge for Unison, one which was not sufficiently met. If organisational fragmentation and decentralisation of employer decision-making was an opportunity for union renewal, in contrast to centralised bargaining removed from the workplace, lack of capacity and industrial relations experience within the membership limited the potential organising opportunities which such developments may present. Furthermore given an embedded union culture of encouraging either passivity at the workplace or a form of activism restricted to participation in internal structures, the prospect of a new cadre of union activists emerging in response to the challenges presented by privatisation was optimistic at best. Without significant structural change and resource allocation, the experience of Unison suggests, rather than renewed workplace trade unionism, an atrophy of members with union organisation withering on the vine.

An increase in organising staff with an expectation that they be managed or supervised by ROs and the employment of Regional Organisers with limited industrial experience did not equip Unison to respond to the industrial relations challenges from new public management. In PSSC (chapter six) Unison's organising strategy had no relevance in dealing with the major issues which were presented to the Unison membership. Union organisation at PSSC, and later EDC, did however remain robust and active through traditional trade union approaches to pay, other terms and conditions of employment and job security supported by experienced ROs.

If Unison has been transformed it was not into an organisation driven by the grassroots membership, with a renewed 'bottom up' democracy, increasingly decentralised but with a coherent approach to organising work. The transformation was to one of directing workplace activism through attempts at closer control and management of staff and the fixed facility time of Unison lay representatives. Consequently Unison became increasingly centralised, limiting the traditional autonomy of ROs and attempting to impose institutional priorities over those of the membership.

Earlier analyses of UK trade unions claims of transformation from servicing to organising showed that for FTOs organising became an additional responsibility to existing representational work (Carter and Cooper 2002). In Unison recruitment has replaced representational work as the key function for organising staff. However specific recruitment targets and vague notions of growth and organising are not evidence of transformation. For Unison branches organising work remained an additional responsibility separate from workplace generated issues, not an organic method of union work (see Byford 2011, De Turberville 2006). The challenge for Unison at all levels remained embedding organising and recruitment more organically within representational work.

The promise of a shift to grassroots organising, creating the potential for more radical union forms, was dissipated through strategic limitations and disconnection from industrial issues. Furthermore the promotion of employer partnerships confirmed the

operation of a form of micro-corporatism (see Carter et al 2003). McIlroy (2013:140) points out that what appeared as 'a radical methodology of union renewal was motivated and driven by otherwise conventional leaders'. Trade unionism at times of crisis often adopted the cloak of militancy but essentially remained conservative. Ideas of building union organisation can unite union bureaucracies and rank and file to a common purpose. Opposition to an apparent union organising agenda is inherently problematic in that context. However the lack of analysis around union purpose in organising strategies has contributed to a position where union bureaucracies establish their own purpose, as in recruitment targets, and extend managerial roles, controls and techniques through FTOs to lay representatives. Organising analyses have failed to sufficiently examine the nature of trade unions and the complex relations between full time officialdom, union activists and members.

Examination of relations with employers confirms it was business as usual with industrial relations strategy being the encouragement of partnership agreements, a reminder of failed business unionism practices of previous eras. Such collaborative arrangements produced negative consequences for union organisation and membership aspiration. With exceptions among ROs, partnership with employers was embraced producing in some instances collaborative arrangements which altered the position of lay representatives as advocates of the workers, reducing their accountability to members and undermining the legitimacy of the union at the workplace. The quid pro quo was in the facilities obtained for recruitment activity. Of consequence was the entrenchment of a lay bureaucracy both at the workplace and within the structures of Unison compliant with the direction of the national union delivered through the regional organising strategy.

Conclusion

The organising model emerged from a collation of approaches to union work encouraging collectivism in resolving workplace issues. However the attraction of union membership is undermined by a strategy which weakens the ability to represent workers. The delegation of representational work to lay representatives was a

potential panacea for addressing the resource implications presented by organising and member's requirements for representation. Two decades of UK union organising strategies have failed to attract the number of new activists envisaged. Whilst the exact number of workplace union representatives is undetermined in the case of Unison (see Chapter Seven) and more generally (Darlington 2010) it is acknowledged that it is less than half the number of 300,000 thought to be so prior to union decline. Anecdotally in Unison it is expected that austerity policies will impact on retention of experienced lay representatives. To reiterate at least twenty five per cent of Unison recognised workplaces have no representative (see chapter seven), consistent with the broader picture for UK trade unions identified by Van Wanrooy *et al.* (2011) in the WERS. Problems such as work intensification, employer hostility, and procedural methods for dispute resolution of the plethora of individualised employment rights combine with a weakening of industrial support for that work discourage new activists.

The attempts to manage and refocus union organisation to prioritise recruitment exacerbates this position. In such circumstances theories of trade union bureaucracy, oligarchy and the potential dominance of the representatives over the represented (Michels 1962 Webb *et al.* 1920) assist in analysis and assessment of strategic objectives and their consequence. The organising model promised an approach to trade unionism which would encourage an inversion from 'top down' to 'bottom up' trade unionism. Although as Milkman (2006) argues there remains the need for 'top down' support. In practice the inversion became the dominance of recruitment motivated by short term institutional interest over representation of workers. This inversion is achieved through a combination of managerialism, union bureaucracy and the permeation of that bureaucracy through lay structures.

Analysis of the research presents a number of concerns for Unison which stemmed from the uncritical adoption of an approach to union organising from abroad without proper consideration of its appropriateness for a UK public services union. The maintaining of rhetoric of organising while effectively abandoning it in favour of recruitment underpinned by a servicing philosophy produced incoherence and

confusion. The narrative of the FTO as the business agent (in the United States) or the arbitration procedure expert (in Australia) was incorrectly applied to UK full time officers. Given the key position of FTOs as the main link between the union and the membership at workplace level it follows that any inaccurate assessment of their role inevitably brings into question the subsequent union organising strategy.

Organising work in Unison was disconnected from the workplace issues relevant to Unison members. Organising strategy had no impact or relevance to the vitality of Unison. However increasing managerial controls impacting on the role of the RO and relations with Unison branches were increasingly problematic given the aforementioned disconnection. The defining of organising work was itself an issue and was applied within a narrative of strategic choice between organising or servicing as opposed to workplace issues and practices. After fifteen years of organising Unison failed to increase membership levels and density, saw the number of workplace representative's decline significantly and provided no evidence for increased industrial or political influence. Indeed the failure to link workplace issues to organising strategy was replicated at regional and national levels. Organising became in effect the management of staff and workplace activists for purposes of achieving arbitrary recruitment targets set by Unison nationally.

Any transformation in Unison is not into an organising union as suggested by Waddington and Kerr (2009). Those changes that did occur increased resources for recruitment activities, underpinned by greater management control and the incorporation of the union FTO into a managerial role through encouraging branches to focus their facility time towards recruitment work. There is no evidence that Unison promoted a more grassroots led confrontational approach to industrial relations, if anything quite the reverse with promotion of employer partnerships. Whilst the numbers of workplace activists continued to decline, the union structure distracted the remaining representatives from a workplace focus by encouraging internally-focused activism producing in the process characteristics of a lay bureaucracy.

Trade Unions attempt to achieve industrial objectives through the power of their members organised in combination within a workplace or related workplaces. Effective representation to achieve those industrial objectives is dependent on a number of factors including the continual recruitment of workers to the union. Trade unions can adopt different methods, approaches and orientations in order to achieve their objectives. Additionally as Hyman (2001) identified trade unions can be organisations positioned based at various points between class, market and society. In Unison the emphasis on recruitment, encouragement of workplace partnerships and the promotion of union membership as an insurance cover suggested a shift in position from one of social to business unionism or from a societal point to a position closer to the market. Unison strategy became emphasising the importance of trade union support in the workplace while simultaneously downgrading the importance and resources for that support producing a developing crisis in representation. This crisis of representation will only deepen with continuing outsourcing of public services and government policies of austerity.

2015 Chapter 10 Conclusions

Introduction

Already concerned at the decline of trade unions in Britain, and of the fortunes of Unison in particular, when I started this thesis seven years ago, my mood has not been lifted in the intervening period. The period has seen the further fall in membership, density and collective bargaining coverage. The public sector faces continued cuts in funding with further privatisation and pay restraint. Opposition to attacks on both standards of public service provision and terms and conditions will be hamstrung by proposed legal reforms including ending the check-off system for the deduction of trade union subscriptions by employers, potentially causing a severe contraction in union income; an imposition of thresholds for industrial action turn outs and votes in favour of industrial action to be legal; increasing the period of notice required for employers before action can be taken; and enabling employers to use agency labour to replace strikers during disputes (see Trade Union Bill 2015 - 2016). Unison is weaker and less well prepared than ever to counter these changes despite its attempts to increase recruitment and its claim to be an organising union.

This concluding chapter provides some reflection on the work I have completed including recognition of the importance of bureaucracy and organisation in addition to the merits of other research work on union organising. It contributes some explanation for why unions appear incapable of learning the lessons from the failure of organising strategies and how organising objectives become distorted and limited to recruitment targets. The uniqueness of the research is identified. I also reflect on how this work may have been improved and finally suggest some further avenues for research.

Purpose of the Thesis

The aim of the research was to consider the impact of organising strategies on union FTOs and how they respond to, influence and contribute to the delivery of the strategy: a much neglected area of analysis. The research also sought to examine the importance of bureaucracy when considering attempts at potentially radical change. Examining the social relations inside trade unions enables a synthesising of classical

sociological theory with more contemporary considerations of decline and renewal. The thesis thereby sought to provide explanation for why trade union organising strategies have failed to lead to union renewal.

Structure of the argument

The thesis commenced by posing the question as to whether union organising strategies, and within such strategies, the full time officer, were building workplace trade unionism or reinforcing bureaucracy. It asserts that organising strategies can be radical or conservative in nature. Trade union leaderships have a track record in adopting approaches to union renewal which fail to provide for any critical analysis of the strategy to be adopted. The introduction of US organising approaches was consistent with this position. The potential for a more radical union form emerging from such strategy was undermined through the simultaneous promotion of employer partnerships and later reducing the practical application of organising to recruitment campaigns.

In the US the influence of business unionism had kept industrial relations academics at arm's length viewing them with suspicion for possessing agendas alien to the general interests of union members (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003). Subsequently their embrace by rapidly weakening US unions desperate for allies produced conditions for optimistic assessments of US organising experience and potential. Isolated examples of organising successes became the future ideal *modus operandi* for union renewal. The dominant narrative became one that trade unions had control of their destiny by switching union resources to organising which led to the adopting of comprehensive organising techniques (Bronfenbrenner 1998).

Criticisms of union bureaucracies were not articulated by US academics but ironically by those who by position as union organisers both colluded and clashed with them (see Erem 2001 and McAlevey 2012). The issue of bureaucracy is significant and in Unison of particular relevance given its structure. The apparent influence of incumbent bureaucracy within the newly formed union raises questions of in whose interest later union strategy supports. Mindful of Michels (1962) 'iron law of oligarchy' and the

potential for the usurping of union democracy by bureaucracy, rather than bringing radical change, organising strategies can be utilised to reinforce the position of existing union oligarchies.

In Unison the already embedded managerial approach contributed to the distortion of organising moving the emphasis from promoting workplace issue-based approaches to one of bureaucratic procedures monitoring progress towards arbitrary recruitment targets. Explicit in Meeting the Organising Challenge (MtOC) and later JABO assessments ROs were increasingly incorporated as managers themselves by attempts to direct their work to national as opposed to local union priorities.

In accepting that unions had a strategic choice between servicing and organising, credence was given to a mistaken view that somehow union work could be compartmentalised in this way. This supported a narrative that FTOs had spent too much time servicing and not organising, contrary to the available evidence. It provided for a union focus on the short term interests of those in union bureaucracies concerned with membership numbers and associated subscription income. This policy position was integral to 'organising', changing the emphasis of FTO roles, and making evident that they were external to the protected positions enjoyed by a core in senior posts.

Whilst some Unison ROs acknowledge these developments and used their increasingly limited autonomy to ensure a more membership centred and industrial focus, it was ROs who followed the desired approach of Unison management, the 'prototypes', who were viewed as the progressive 'good officers'. Perversely, whilst those 'traditional' ROs recognised the disconnection between expectations of Unison branches and regional support, it was the 'prototypes' who advanced and in doing so colonised Unison staffing structures, exacerbating problems of branch support.

The organising strategy in Unison, in accepting the primacy of recruitment over membership support and representation, affected industrial support for branches. The recruitment strategy was dislocated from the industrial concerns of members and consequently Unison undermined itself. Whilst trade unions have options in making

strategic choices in response to decline, in Unison the choices made contributed to that decline.

Representation of workers is why unions exist. With continuing reduction in workplace representatives, the increase in individual employment rights and the encouragement to resolve workplace grievances through procedures, the ability for Unison to honour its public proclamations of the 'essential cover' insurance service at work is questionable. This campaign did confirm that notions of promoting organising had ended and consumer unionism was back in vogue.

Maintaining the position of Unison within existing pluralist industrial relations frameworks has been weakened. Retreating from the arenas of employer negotiations and consultations, discipline and grievance representation and collective bargaining more generally through reducing resources to support such processes will and is resulting in further union decline. Reorientation of Unison from a legitimate interest body within society to one managing internal staff meeting recruitment targets has become the predominant function. Organising strategies are increasingly delimiting both the FTO role as advocates on members' issues and the broader aspirations of the union. Employer partnership agreements imply at best the maintenance of the status quo in which union influence is marginal: or worse the reality of the union as a junior partner in change management agendas. The latter suggests a form of surrender in the power battle at the workplace. Whilst some FTOs remain an exception to the rule, more generally the union 'sword of justice' is placed back in the scabbard.

Reflections on Unison organising strategy

Unison's organising was barely implemented before being abandoned. Using Unison's experience to evaluate Russo and Banks (1996), or any other model, is not therefore possible. Some of the reasons for the course that Unison took were rehearsed above but parallels with other union experiences raise a more general question as to why unions appear unable to take an organising agenda forward. If adding to our knowledge of trade union experiences of organising and the demands they placed on FTOs is the first contribution of the thesis, then the second is the attempt to answer

this general question by linking the question of organising to more classical literature on the sociology of trade unions and in particular the extent and nature of trade union bureaucracy.

Unison's transition from WOW to MtOC represented a major retreat from organising. As the thesis notes the context of the retreat was WOW'S lack of immediate results in terms of recruitment. The explanation of this failure lay in the manner in which organising was introduced (a lack of serious discussion at all levels of the union), lack of conceptual clarity around the core concepts of organising (organising and servicing, both necessary and opposites), and an overall lack of commitment to organising evident in the emphasis on short-term goals, continued central control and a failure to critically examine and spread successful initiatives at local level. The outcome was MtOC with its semantic collapse of recruitment and organising, with its elevation of recruitment to the primary objective. Recruitment, rather than being an outcome of organising became the end in itself with little or no systematic provision for support and development of workplace organisation, as reflected in the new MtOC staffing structure in application. There is evidence that developments of this type are not restricted to Unison alone and was indeed signalled in the TUC's New Unionism project from the very beginning (Carter and Fairbrother 1998a).

To strengthen this orientation Unison was increasingly appointing both a new kind of FTO and additional posts at other levels of seniority. New staff were recruited on the basis that they were deemed to have the different skills needed for the model of organising adopted by the union. These staff, termed prototypical because they appeared to represent the future, more often knew less about industrial and legal employment issues and had little if any negotiating and representational experience: their strengths were associated with campaigning and recruitment. The new structure withdrew ROs from direct workplace responsibilities and gave them instead responsibility for managing other organising staff and monitoring recruitment performance

The optimism and potential radicalism which emanated from emphasising a grassroots workplace based road to union renewal soon evaporated at the altar of recruitment targets. The thesis set out to analyse these failings in the context of examination of union full time officers in organising strategies. On strategy there was a failure to obtain support from key union constituencies, an incorrect analysis of the role performed by UK FTOs in workplaces, a mistaken belief that somehow unions had strategic choices between servicing and organising and a failure to consider the inherent conservative nature of trade unions within conditions prone to the extension of bureaucracy.

The failure to define organising objectives provided for ambiguity both in strategy and in the FTO role. The eventual limiting of the term 'organising' to recruitment enshrined in targets provided some clarity with the RO becoming in effect a recruitment manager. A focus on recruitment targets provides for potential conflict with branch agendas and priorities particularly that of demands for representation at work. Unison has transformed into a union where the focus is on recruitment and where industrial issues are no longer organic in deliberations, unless there is a crisis. In this situation the ability to address workplace issues is weakened by recruitment of staff whose capabilities and strengths lie elsewhere.

The increased delegation of representational work and recruitment of staff from non-industrial backgrounds has comparison with US unions (Carter et al. 2003). The associated warnings regarding the importance of retaining existing members when considering organising strategies has gone unheeded (Williams 1999). Furthermore given Unison organising or recruitment work was predominantly based on in fill activity in recognised workplaces (Waddington and Kerr 2009), relations with employers are undertaken through long standing procedural arrangements rooted in 1970s reforms (Hyman 2003). Unlike in Australia, the structures in recognised workplaces remained, providing for union representation through employer joint negotiating committees, other internal consultative bodies and grievance and disciplinary procedures. Beyond the workplace the Employment Tribunal system,

though severely curtailed with the introduction of fees, remains intact. However the industrial relations terrain and how that connects with organising strategy has not been sufficiently considered.

The reduction in focus on such procedural arrangements has the potential to undermine strategies for renewal whatever the label. The trend towards FTO withdrawal from representation produces a reduction in the capacity available to Unison for member representation or support for lay representatives engaged in such processes. This is compounded by the decrease in the number of workplace representatives available to embrace such work (Darlington 2010). As well as a reduced capacity, whether at lay representative or FTO, a reduction in expertise occurs increasing the possibility for unsatisfactory representational outcomes exacerbated by the colonisation of Unison staffing structures by individuals with non-industrial experience. The increased responsibility for representational matters placed on lay representatives may exacerbate the decline in their numbers adding to reported issues of lack of facility time support and increased work intensification within public services (Darlington 2004). The danger is that such downgrading of representation produces dissatisfaction with union support from existing members, reducing the union premium and undermining the rationale for union membership. Strategic choices may not always result in the outcome desired.

The lack of clarity on objectives was also manifested in the promotion of the union's message. The development of a national advertising campaign, 'cover at work', reinforces the perception of a union member as a passive recipient of union services. Yet ROs, as detailed, are increasingly recruited on a basis which disregards abilities to represent and negotiate on behalf of members, or support lay representatives in that process. A national campaign promoting an individual service, whilst on the ground that service is diminished, and which contradicts Unison staff promoting concepts of collectivism through organising work, only illustrates leadership failure to develop and articulate a consistent and coherent trade union vision.

For union FTOs the prevailing assumption that too much time is spent servicing and not organising was addressed through making them accountable for the management of recruitment activity. However Unison's experience with the 'traditional' ROs confirmed that FTOs were not automatically emissaries of the union bureaucracy. Within the gamut of errors in the introduction of US organising into the UK was the failure to consider the role of the FTO: given the importance and complexity of their relations with other constituencies in the union that failure should not be underestimated. The common cause expressed by some FTOs and lay representatives confirmed it is too simplistic to suggest trade unions are characterised by monolithic divisions between FTOs and the rank and file. In reality divisions exist within these constituencies and alliances can be formed across the divide. Those divisions and alliances can stem from the inherent tension between national organising strategies and local industrial priorities. 'Prototypical' ROs, willingly or otherwise, became advocates for the union oligarchy, whilst the traditional RO adopts a position as a mediator attempting to balance priorities and interests. For the latter the irony is they continue to enable and support workplace organisation believing it is both in the membership and institutional interest.

Reflections on other work on organising

There have been three types of academic reaction to the advent of organising to the UK: organising comprises a set of techniques; organising is conceptually confused and unsustainable; and in response to the latter in particular a defence that contends that organising has never been consistently adopted. The first reaction - the toolbox approach - most closely parallels that of the unions (see Simms et al 2013) and is represented most clearly by Heery *et al's*. (2003:63) position where having noted that 'all three approaches - servicing, partnership and organizing- are present and being applied by considerable proportions of UK unions', they state that 'these are several ways to restore membership, not a single approach as suggested by advocates of the organizing model' (Heery *et al.* 2003:75). It has been argued elsewhere that Heery *et al's*. position is pragmatic, rather than critical, refraining from any rigorous evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of the approaches (Carter 2004). Later in acknowledging

the limited impact of organising Heery and Simms (2008) identify constraints on union organising which were limited to the characteristics of organisers, the nature of the projects they were assigned and how they were managed. This uncritical approach, lacking explicit position and acceptance of diversity in trade union methods, both organising and servicing, opens the space for those like De Turberville (2004, 2007) who conceive the whole idea of organising as incoherent.

De Turberville's attack on organising likewise however stems from a position that has no fixed base. Rather it originates from criticisms that combine a number of theoretical misconceptions together with examples of trade union practice that are explicable without undermining the coherence and justification of an organising approach. Thus there is criticism of 'managed activism' that is indeed a practice of some unions and again they may designate the approach as organising, but it is not consistent with the original intentions of Russo and Banks (1996) or Bronfenbrenner *et al.* (1998). Fletcher and Hurd (1998) also identify key shortcomings in the articulation of the organising model and what it would mean for trade unions. As the case in Unison, and as well as a feature noted by Simms and Holgate (2010), the purpose of organising is insufficiently articulated. Consequently different union constituencies within bureaucracies and rank and file can all identify with the need to improve union organisation. Conservative and radical orientations can become united in union approach if not purpose. However in closer analysis Fletcher and Hurd point out that the organising thus becomes so broad that it fails to distinguish different approaches to relations with employers, how unions are politically represented and whether there is to be a reinvigoration of internal union democracy.

Finally, there are defences of organising that are on occasions implicit in the sense of advancing accounts of successful campaigns (e.g. Lopez 2004) as well as those that while defending organising recognise at one level or another how far short unions generally are in adopting the approach (Bronfenbrenner 1997, McAlevey 2012). In addition Carter (2000, 2005) has attempted to explicitly defend organising while

locating the generalised failure on the part of trade unions in the lack of adoption of organising in a sufficiently comprehensive and open manner.

My study falls very much into the third response. There is adequate evidence from Unison that rather than organising failing, the union largely failed to organise. This failure can be traced in a number of particular aspects such as the conceptual confusion about the nature of organising and servicing and the relationship between them. Similarly, the collapse of the idea of organising into recruitment, the divorce of organising from representation and from that devolvement or discouragement of the basic trade union function of representing members inevitably produces failure. Moreover, the changing policies caused tensions and problems for a substantial number of FTOs. Many, termed the traditionalists, were not hostile to the idea of organising as such, but did not recognize its embodiment in the policies of the union. In addition, how organising was interpreted and applied by Unison management threatened relations between FTOs and lay representatives: primarily due to the distancing from the issues in workplaces that would have enabled more effective organising. Traditionalists were, however, not the only FTOs.

Reflections on bureaucracy and organisation in trade unions

The classical position on bureaucracy in trade unions was proposed by Michels (1962) with the contention that, along with political parties, unions were subject to 'an iron law of oligarchy'. Hyman (1989) while not contesting the existence of a bureaucracy insisted that Michels was wrong to characterize bureaucracy as inevitable as periodic revolts equally suggested a tendency for rank and file to restructure relations in favour of membership influences and interests. Hyman also took aim at traditional socialist conceptions of the trade union bureaucracy by contesting the notion that it only comprised a small number of senior officials. Hyman stressed the relational aspects of bureaucracy in which it was possible to incorporate lay officials.

There have recently been two responses to Hyman's perspectives. Carter et al (2014) largely underwrote Hyman's position through a study of the way that even in a union with a left-wing reputation a national lay body utilized a network of branch officials to

frustrate calls for strike action against the implementation of lean production methods. In contrast, Darlington and Upchurch (2012) mounted a defence of the more traditional notion of bureaucracy and refuted Hyman's perspectives by in effect simply reasserting the significance of full time national officials. Their focus therefore failed to examine the very relationships that were central to Hyman's contribution.

The findings in this work add a texture to Hyman's perspectives by illustrating that not only is there a series of national officials devising policies with little reference to the views of branches and the membership more generally but that also whole layers of Unison lay officials are drawn in to a web of relations that buttress the authority of the centre. The extent of bureaucracy also provides a refutation of the relationship between de-centralisation of managerial authority and decision-making and the renewal of workplace trade unionism promulgated by Fairbrother and colleagues (1996; 2000; 2013).

Organising a radical sheen on conservative trade unionism

Based on a belief that trade unions are not passive organisations vulnerable to the prevailing winds of the political economy but have the ability to chart their own destiny through strategic choices (see Heery and Kelly 1994, Frege and Kelly 2004), the shift from servicing to workplace organising promised a more aggressive and confident union movement. The borrowing of US and Australian organising approaches, however, was undertaken without any critical assessment of appropriateness to the UK with its different systems of industrial relations, traditions and culture.

Nevertheless Unison embraced the organising model as evident through training initiatives such as 'Winning the Organised Workplace' or 'WOW' courses. Highlighting how everyday workplace issues of grievance can either be used to build the union through encouraging workplace activism (organising) or enhance the role of the full time officer and thereby reinforce a passive membership (servicing) the initial orientation was to encourage organising. However such an approach to union work became distorted by the idea that any dealing with workplace issues by ROs was by definition servicing and the simultaneous but contradictory idea that workplace

representatives carrying out the same roles were organising. The WOW courses were dropped and organising became defined almost exclusively as recruitment activity. The role of the FTO in Unison was to be developed into the management of other organising staff and branch activists.

The organising campaigns in the US are primarily in the context of winning election ballots under the NLRB process. It is questionable as to whether approaches to organising on this basis have successful transferability (Carter et al 2003). What does appear to have transferred successfully is the idea that organising unions adopt a toolbox of practices which are then labelled as organising. This becomes an objective in itself and limits organising practices to gaining membership growth. Such an approach has some significance for the future vitality of UK trade unions and their prospects for renewal. Trade union organising as a back to basic approach to union work developing orientations to union building has been discarded in favour of recruitment targets thus providing evidence of how short term goals dominate. Hyman's identification of the emergence of a lay bureaucracy is reinforced through the nature of Unison's democracy and its organising experience in which lay officers' cooperation and not resistance to recruitment targets overrode industrial issues. What Unison presented was divisions within both union FTOs; lay officers and rank and file members with an increasing disconnection in priorities at all levels of the organisation.

Criticisms of Michels (1962) 'iron law of oligarchy' are well founded and legitimate given the obvious checks and balances within trade unions, the plurality of interest that inform policy and with FTOs, rather than following the oligarchy, can be independent in mind and action. However where Michel's theory is legitimate is in the warning of the dangers or inherent tendencies within political parties and trade unions to develop self-serving conservative bureaucratic oligarchies. This potential is only heightened at times of crisis when the need for institutional survival becomes all too apparent. The experience of Unison confirms that suggestions of more radical forms emerging out of organising strategies are misplaced in the face of unions increasing control from the centre when implementing organising agendas. The failure to

organise can be attributed to the existence of a union oligarchy but to reiterate the idea of an 'iron law' is mistaken given the relations of some full time officers to branches, their reluctance to comply with management direction and their open minded criticisms of union leaderships.

Whilst the organising model suggested an increased propensity to support workplace activism and militancy the kind of union which may emerge was not sufficiently considered. Clearly a union built around militant approaches to addressing workplace issues will look different to that built on partnership with employers (Danford *et al.* 2009). Whatever the approach, with no evidence of enthusiasm for union membership, comparable to previous surges in union membership, the resource implications for organising strategies cannot be underestimated. In practice the 'organising model' was limited to a process of 'managed activism' (Heery *et al.* 2000) classically illustrated in the case of Unison. For workers to address power relations they need to organise. However the limitation of the organising model is in the failure to develop strategies towards the broader issues of union constituencies, politics and the problems for trade unions from globalisation (Carter 2006).

Success or failure can only be judged if the rhetoric of organising had been matched in reality in a broader version of trade unionism beyond a set of techniques and tactics. Lustig (2002) points to the failure to decentralise union power and reinvigorate union democracy. Milkman and Voss (2004) observe the lack of genuine rank and file involvement in organising strategies. Claims that 'organising' is breaking iron laws of oligarchy (Voss and Sherman 2000) seem over enthusiastic at best. Indeed when local lay bureaucracy is disturbed by organising successes which produced an influx of new activists, threats to that bureaucracy were identified and addressed (see Moody 2007).

The failure of organising and the failure to learn the lessons

When I commenced this research the Meeting the Organising Challenge (MtOC) staffing structure was in its infancy. There was no such system as JABO and Unison management seemed convinced of their approach and direction. As I finish that conviction is now under question. Within 'A' Region's 2015 regional plan the

identification of the need to raise representational standards has become a key objective. Prior to the plan a number of 'traditional' Regional Organisers had been consulted by the RMT on how this could be done. The rise in complaints of dissatisfaction from members requiring representation had led to a belief in the RMT that action was now required. The scale of disconnection between national union strategy and Unison's membership had been starkly illustrated to me over the previous two years with a number of incidents which although separate taken together saw the culmination of years of organising without connecting to workplace issues.

The first incident had been the news that at Unison's annual conference the General Secretary in his annual address proclaimed that Unison was going to smash the governments pay freeze in local government. This was far removed from the key concerns of members faced with widespread job losses and ignored the innate conservatism of union members in a climate where friends and colleagues are losing their jobs. The second was on the day of the publication of the Francis report in 2013 into the Mid Staffordshire hospital scandal, which coincided with a visit to 'A' Region from the Head of Unison Health Service sector. She confirmed that Unison was not going to comment on the key findings of the inquiry as it was all negative for workers. Instead of using the publication of the inquiry report for the opportunity to link poor treatment of patients with that of staff, the mistakes of target driven policy, the treatment of whistleblowers, support for union representatives and the problems of bullying in the NHS, Unison had nothing to say. Thirdly, coordinated ballots for industrial action on pay saw membership turnouts of less than 15%, (85,000 members out of 600,000 claimed in local government, of which just under 50,000 supported action) with small majorities in favour of action and leaderships too weak to call a halt to strikes in which one in twelve union members had voted in favour of action (Unison 2014c). Together a damning indictment on long held strategy, on leadership and was indicative of the failure of trade unions to reflect on practice and policy.

Reflection may suggest a number of changes in the development of union strategy not least of which would be ensuring that representation at all levels become central in

deliberations for renewal strategy: which would include a combination of industrial, organisational, political and legal actions and initiatives. A commitment to supporting more adversarial approaches which assert the union as an independent voice and advocate for workers together with a rejection of limited partnership agreements is an urgent requirement: as is the need to facilitate and encourage the lessons from success and defeats.

If Unison was serious about change it would have sought or summoned support for that change through a serious dialogue with its members. Exemplars and victories could have been spread. Instead credibility is undermined through the authorisation of sham national industrial actions which know at the trust of members and activists alike. National strategy could provide for a framework that allowed workplaces to determine issues and priorities around which they campaigned and built union organisation. If these issues had broader commonality across the membership they would develop organically given a strategy which would support such processes through applying appropriate resources and ensuring the promotion of successful initiatives and acts of solidarity. Responses to the questions posed by Fletcher and Hurd (1998) relating to who is the union constituency, what is the mission of trade unions, what are the approaches to industrial relations and where do trade unions sit in relation to globalisation and solidarity would assist in developing a greater coherency in future strategy development.

Distinctiveness of the research

The research is unique in that it was undertaken by a full time officer with an internal perspective who has experienced the consequences of US organising being embraced in both MSF and Unison. It is the most extensive examination of organising in a single trade union. Unison as an organisational unit possesses important and particular characteristics which require consideration in any research on union change. Apart from (and to a lesser degree) Carter (2000) on MSF, this has not been done. In this case the work is more grounded given the internal perspective and extent of the work

considering different constituent parts. It has as its central feature a focus on union FTOs who have been much neglected in previous research in this area.

Furthermore contribution to the organising debate is in demonstrating the importance of synthesising classical theories about the nature of bureaucracy with contemporary debates on trade unionism, including more recent literature on union renewal which echoes disappointment about the results of organising strategies but falters in providing explanation. Examination of organising strategies and their success or failure tends to ignore the importance of the nature of the political economy in which such strategies take place. This work is a reminder of that importance not least of the proliferation of individual employment rights from 1970s onwards which creates challenges of capacity and competency for trade unions as well as militating against collective approaches to workplace disputes and dissatisfaction.

Finally the research provides empirical evidence in support of Hyman's observation of the emergence of a lay or semi bureaucracy.

Further reflection

Semi structured interviews with eleven Unison FTOs (Regional Organisers), five managers, fourteen support staff of various grades and interviews and focus groups with twenty three branch activists were undertaken. The primary research was underpinned by observations of Unison staff and lay activists including at staff team meetings, conferences and branch meetings. The ability to have daily access to internal Unison documents, training and briefing materials and general communications was invaluable.

In considering the findings and conclusions, it may have added to the robustness of the research had specific interviews been undertaken with the Unison General Secretary and national officers responsible for training and education, given the importance for development of lay representatives. Conversely some of those Unison activists who I could identify as located in the heart of Unison lay or semi bureaucracy might also have deepened the findings and enriched the analysis. However my focus was on the

RO role and my considerations developed around the direct relations to the RO within Unison's structure. The exception made was interviewing national officials with responsibility for organising whose particular input gave valuable insight into the national perspective, confirming the confusion over how organising is defined and how organising strategy should impact on ROs. It was apparent that additional data collection from other senior union officials would have only added further to the confused picture at national level: confirmation of which is provided in the statements made in connection with the national recruitment campaign.

Suggestions for further research

This research has focused on a large general union organising mainly in public services. Whilst there are specific characteristics in Unison which emanate from its own structures and its relations with public sector employers, the tendency towards bureaucratisation is an issue for all trade unions given their structural position and competing interests. The significance of and extent of the role of lay bureaucracy is an area which therefore requires further examination. In doing so as a contrast it would be helpful to consider the nature and extent of bureaucracy in a single occupation union such as the Fire Brigades Union (FBU). Given the disconnection between the national strategy and the local workplace what may also be of interest is in examining other union approaches to consider how they succeed or fail in linking the national with the local.

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Appendix One

Research Schedule

May 2011 - presentation to 'A' Region staff conference

June to September 2011 - Semi structured interviews with Regional Organisers

October to November 2011 – Semi structured interviews with Regional Management

December 2011 to January 2012 – Semi structured interviews with other Regional staff

March 2012 – Semi structured interview with Branch activists

May 2012 – First branch activist focus group discussion

May 2012 – First senior national manager semi structured interview

September 2012 - Second branch activist focus group discussion

October 2012 – EDC branch activist roundtable discussion

October 2012 – Second national senior manager semi structured interview

March to May 2013 - National recruitment advertising campaign

February 2014 onwards – 'Operation Workplace' notes

Appendix Two

Semi structured interview questionnaire*

1. What is your job role?
2. What is your experience of working for Unison or other trade unions?
3. Any prior trade union experience?
4. What difficulties do you think the union is currently facing?
5. What do you understand as the main components of Unisons organising strategy?
6. What do you consider as the key responsibilities of the RO role?
7. With the emphasis on organising how have the RO responsibilities changed over time?
8. What do you understand by the term organising?
9. What are we organising for?
10. Are you familiar with the Organising model and does it have any relevance or value to your work?
11. How does national connect or support the Organising work of the RO?
12. How does region connect etc.
13. How do branches engage and support organising agenda?
14. What is your view of the joint assessment of branches and Regional awards night?
15. What is your experience of relations with branches and key activists in terms of organising?
16. How does the structure of the union align itself to or inhibit organising?
17. What obstructs you or creates tensions in your work?
18. In relations with employers does the organising work create any issues?
19. What is your understanding of partnership agreements?
20. Do partnership agreements compliment or inhibit organising work?
21. What is your view on the claim that all members want from the union is in AA type service when needed?

22. What is your view to the position that RO are more comfortable dealing with representation rather than organising?
23. What importance do you place on the importance of representation?
24. Who should undertake representation?
25. Is the training and education for lay representatives fit for purpose?
26. If so why if not what needs to be done?
27. In terms of RO support how do you see the management structure in Unison contributing?
28. How is the current austerity climate and cuts impacting on organising?
29. How does the labour link and political role connect with the organising work?
30. Does the Unison structure support organising in a changing public sector?
31. How do you view the future prospects for Unison?
32. Anything else to add?

*Questions were adjusted dependant on interviewee position